

# Antinomies of Inter- and Transcultural Learning

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**Abstract:** It is a difficult and certainly troubling insight that some of the goals or competences under discussion in the context of inter- and transcultural learning can and must be seen as having little in common. They can even be considered as conflicting, contradictory or mutually exclusive – one may only reflect on the discrepant expectations connected with the goal of “critical thinking” (with regard to other cultures) on the one hand and the idea of “emphatic understanding” (of other cultures) on the other (cp. Breithaupt, 2017). Such jarring of oppositional phenomena in educational contexts can be explored with reference to Helsper’s discussion of how any kind of teaching or learning in today’s modern, differentiated society takes place within a matrix of oppositional concepts and objectives (cp. Helsper, 2002, 2010; Schlömerkemper, 2017). Specifically, Helsper uses the term “antinomies” to indicate that pedagogic practice always entails a choice between different options, each “hailing,” so to speak, to be given prominence and each encompassing a different range of specific teaching and learning goals, strategies, techniques and practical steps. This article will apply the concept of pedagogic antinomies to current challenges in the fields of inter- and transcultural teaching/learning.

**Keywords:** intercultural learning, transcultural learning, literature and culture in EFL, pedagogic antinomies, education goals



## 1 The “blind spots” of inter- and transcultural concepts

It has become a truism almost universally acknowledged that in the area of inter- and transcultural learning the target of “understanding the other” is commonly described as the ultimate target (cp. Grimm, Meyer & Volkmann, 2015, p. 159). It can be phrased with different terms: it can be posited as a pedagogic goal or conceptualized as an essential element of intercultural competence or as the ultimate aim of transcultural competence and thus as a sort of “soft skill” (for a discussion of differences between interculturality and transculturality, see Delanoy, 2012). In all cases, the ability to understand the (culturally) other’s perspective is given prime significance. The pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, p. 25) described this process of understanding as “the final goal of the ethnographer,” with the aim to “grasp the native’s point of view.” This famous description was echoed in many anthropological, sociological, psychological and philosophical publications such as in Clifford Geertz’ seminal 1974 article entitled “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding.” In the highly influential writings of EFL<sup>1</sup> pedagogue and philosopher Lothar Bredella (1996, 2004, 2010), this implies the ability to change perspectives, coordinate perspectives and to come to a changed understanding of “self” and “other” through an ongoing negotiation of meaning. Numerous times, Bredella describes the process of understanding the other as a negotiation of meaning in his publications, as exemplified in this typical quote:

„Die Grundstruktur des Verstehens besagt, dass wir uns in Andere versetzen und eine Innenperspektive einnehmen, so dass wir die Welt mit ihren Augen zu sehen versuchen. Die Innenperspektive reicht jedoch nicht aus. Wir müssen auch eine Außenperspektive einnehmen und die Welt mit unseren eigenen Augen sehen, um auf das, was sie uns zu sagen haben, antworten zu können. Es handelt sich um einen dialogischen Prozess, bei dem wir von unserem Selbst- und Weltverständnis nicht einfach absehen können. [...] Indem wir eine Innenperspektive einnehmen, verhindern wir, dass wir andere unter unsere eigenen Begriffe und Wertvorstellungen subsumieren, und können damit auch in den Blick bekommen, wie uns die Anderen sehen und wie wir mit ihnen in ein Gespräch kommen können. [...] [Dem folgt,] dass Verstehen in dem Wechselspiel zwischen Innen- und Außenperspektive nicht zu einem Abschluss kommen kann.“ (Bredella, 2010, p. xxiv)<sup>2</sup>

Other theorists of hermeneutic approaches like Werner Delanoy (2012) and Heinz Antor (2010) have elaborated on such concepts of understanding the other – *Fremdverstehen*. They have insisted that such a “melting of horizons” à la Gadamer needs to be conceptualized as an ongoing, unending and open process of change. It is one in which meaning-creation remains in flux and open to re-negotiations. In a less theoretical and philosophical manner, theories and concepts in the field of foreign language teaching have named the ability to take the other person’s perspective in intercultural contexts as an essential prerequisite for successful or efficient communication and exchange of ideas. Specifically, the ability to put oneself in the position of the other person has been described as being of paramount importance. The ability to feel or experience “curiosity, openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other” (Byram, 1997, as quoted in Grimm et al., 2015, p. 166) is at the core of such concepts. Prominently, *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* states as one of its main principles “[t]o promote

<sup>1</sup> English as a Foreign Language.

<sup>2</sup> “The basic structure of understanding means that we put ourselves in the position of the other and take on their inner perspective in an attempt to see the world through their eyes. This inner perspective is not sufficient, though. We also need to adopt an outer perspective to see the world with our own eyes to be able to answer to what these eyes can tell us. This entails a dialogic process during which we cannot do without our own self- and world-concept. By taking on the inner perspective, we avoid appropriating others according to our own terminology and value system, and therefore we can also focus on how others see us and how we can get into a conversation with them. [Accordingly,] the act of understanding as an interplay between the inner and the outer perspective cannot come to a final ending.” (Transl. L.V.)

mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 3). Frequently, similar interpersonal values are named in foreign language teaching, such as solidarity with the less privileged and acceptance or appreciation of difference and otherness. In short, the willingness to adopt the other’s point of view and to change one’s own, limited outlook on life or certain aspects of life have been propagated.

Indeed, the often fuzzy concepts of empathy, respect and tolerance, with all the semantic connotations accompanying them, have become such an unquestioned, “given” and integral part of inter- and transcultural learning concepts that possible pitfalls or downsides have been almost completely neglected. Only recently has the widely accepted valorizing of empathy been scrutinized critically in two publications, both interestingly published in the same year, 2017, by philosophers and sociologists Paul Bloom and Fritz Breithaupt (see Bloom, 2017; Breithaupt, 2017). Famously, it was Karl Popper who in his seminal 1956 publication on *The Open Society and Its Enemies* had already reflected on the “paradox of tolerance,” stating that “[u]nlimited tolerance [towards the intolerant] must lead to the disappearance of tolerance“ (Popper, 1956, p. 546). In a similar vein, American pragmatist Richard Rorty warned of the consequences of an anything-goes attitude by voicing his concerns that “we have become so open-minded that our brains have fallen out” (Rorty, 1989, p. 203). Such skeptical sentiments may be kept in mind when considering a number of what might be called critical incidents reported in the press recently. All are of extreme relevance in the context of inter- and transcultural learning, revealing, in a nutshell, the “blind spots” or paradoxes of the demand to understand the other. The three instances referred to in the next section have specifically been chosen with an eye on politically and geographically different areas.

## 2 Empathy and its limitations – three critical incidents<sup>3</sup>

To begin with a controversial issue currently much discussed in Western countries, an article in the German quality newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (FAZ.net) discussed the exhibition “Contemporary Muslim Fashion” on display at Frankfurt’s Museum of Applied Arts (*Museum für Angewandte Kunst*). Specifically, the article found fault with the display of contemporary burka fashions in colorful variations, which was described in the museum’s press statement as an expression of “individual, religious and cultural identity” (all quotes from Bethke, 2019, n.p.; transl. L.V.). Moreover, the museum’s press release lauded the “sophistication” displayed in the exhibition with respect to “how religious aesthetics are interwoven with global fashion trends.” In a scathing comment entitled “Toleranz, die blind macht” (“Tolerance that blinds you”), journalist Hannah Bethke expressed her utter concerns about the “fallacy” underlying such views on clothes. For her, they are emblematic of a suppressive system of patriarchy. I will quote her argument at length since it points to the heart of the issue of the role of empathy in inter- and transcultural learning:

„Die Schau [...] befördert eine Entpolitisierung der Bekleidung, die genau das nicht ist: bloß eine Mode. Mit westlichem Blick, den sie gerade in Frage stellen wollen, rufen Verfechter kultureller Vielfalt gerne aus: Das sei bloß anders als bei uns, nicht schlechter! Doch das kann nur annehmen, wer nicht sehen will, was es bedeutet, sich zeit seines Lebens in der Öffentlichkeit verschleiern zu müssen, entrechtet zu werden, einfache Dinge wie die Nahrungsaufnahme nur unter großen Mühen verrichten zu können, weil die Burka über dem Mund hängt, während Männer in T-Shirts und Flipflops mit freiem Gesicht daneben sitzen. Und so dient das allerorts hochgelobte Gebot der Diversität gerade nicht dem Kampf für

<sup>3</sup> The examples in this chapter have been chosen for their contemporary relevance and because they illustrate very different foci on the topic.

Gleichheit und Freiheit, sondern vor allem der westlichen Selbstbestätigung, auf der richtigen Seite zu stehen. Multikulti, divers, integrativ: Es klingt alles schick, und die Ausstellung passt sich unverblümt diesem vermeintlich weltoffenen Zeitgeist an – aber es verfehlt die Sache. Denn vor lauter politisch korrektem Betragen geht das kritische Urteilsvermögen verloren.“<sup>4</sup>

The journalist’s reaction encapsulates a clear, finally unsolvable paradox: the demand to accept other cultures as they are in a non-judgemental manner on the one side and a critical approach to culture(s) on the other, which is informed here by feminist and emancipatory agendas.

The second example has a completely different political background. In his bizarre manifesto on white supremacy, the right-wing terrorist responsible for New Zealand’s Christ Church massacre in 2019 mentioned US-President Donald Trump as an influence. He praised Trump as “a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose,” yet refrained from supporting his policies (The Guardian, 2019, n.p.). While the White House dismissed the mention of the President in the manifesto and called the gunman “a disturbed individual, an evil person,” Donald Trump hastened to express his empathy for the victims in a twitter message:

“My warmest sympathy and best wishes goes out to the people of New Zealand after the horrible massacre in the Mosques. 49 innocent people have so senselessly died, with so many more seriously injured. The U.S. stands by New Zealand for anything we can do. God bless all!” (Trump, 2019)

In the context of German EFL classrooms, this topic involving two “target cultures” and dubious political entanglements is clearly an issue where questions of empathy, sympathy and political questions of responsibility can be discussed in a most controversial manner. There is no need here to go into the details of these entanglements, stemming mostly from Trump’s unambiguous endorsement of right-wing stances. Let it suffice that, again, the issue of “empathy” here is not as easy as it is usually conceptualized in foreign language teaching/learning discourses.

The third example neatly illustrates what Bloom (2017) and Breithaupt (2017) have in mind when they outline the manipulative, darker sides of empathy. The example even provides insights into the issue of how sensible arguments usually brought forward in the context of intercultural understanding can be misused in a cynical manner. In 2019, the former British colony Brunei, a state under the aegis of sharia law, announced its decision to start imposing death by stoning as a punishment for homosexual sex. In a four-page letter written to the European parliament, Brunei made an effort to claim that convictions would be rare. This was described in some detail (all quotes from Boffey, 2019, n.p.):

“The penal sentences of *hadd* – stoning to death and amputation – imposed for offences of theft, robbery, adultery and sodomy, have extremely high evidentiary threshold, requiring no less than two or four men of high moral standing and piety as witnesses, to the exclusion of every form of circumstantial evidence.”

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<sup>4</sup> “The exhibition supports the process of depoliticizing clothes. However, clothes are exactly not what is posited here – just a fashion. From a Western perspective, which they intend to question here really, proponents of cultural diversity are eager to state: all of this is just different, not worse! However, this can only be taken for granted by those who do not want to understand what it means to remain veiled in public all one’s life, to have no human rights, to do simple things like eating only with great effort – all of this because the burka covers your mouth while men in T-shirts and flip-flops and with an open face are sitting next to you. And thus the much-appreciated and lauded demand for diversity does not further the fight for equality and freedom whatsoever, but instead it serves to re-confirm Western attitudes to be on the right side of global debates. Multicultural, diverse, integrative – it’s all so trendy, and the exhibition blatantly endears itself to this supposedly international *zeitgeist* – but it misses the point. Because with all this politically correct behavior, critical thinking gets lost.” (Transl. L.V.)

Moreover, the kingdom's mission to the EU attempted to invoke understanding of its traditional values: "The criminalisation of adultery and sodomy is to safeguard the sanctity of family lineage and marriage to individual Muslims, particularly women." The letter claimed that it wanted to clarify misconceptions about its traditions. In a twisted manner, it expressly called for "tolerance, respect and understanding" with regard to the country's desire to preserve its traditional values.

What do these three, very different critical cases share as a common denominator? From the point of view of intercultural learning, they help to crystallize the issue of how concepts of inter- and transcultural learning need to be re-adjusted with regard to "taking on the other person's position," and thus also with regard to empathy, change of perspectives etc. Like all interpersonal encounters highly charged with sociocultural meanings, intercultural scenarios need to be re-conceptualized as riddled with contradictions, paradoxes and incommensurable challenges. These contradictions of intercultural and transcultural learning may fruitfully be conceptualized with regard to a model of pedagogic "antinomies" as devised by Werner Helsper, professor emeritus of pedagogy at Halle University in Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany (see, for an introduction, Helsper, 2002, 2010).

### 3 Helsper's concept of pedagogic antinomies

It is a difficult and troubling insight that some of the goals or competences under discussion in the context of literature and culture can and must be seen as having little in common. As regards a theoretical model, such a highlighting of jarring or oppositional phenomena in teaching and learning contexts can be outlined with reference to Helsper's discussion of how any kind of teaching or learning in today's modern, differentiated society takes place within a matrix of oppositional concepts and objectives (Helsper, 2002, 2010; see also Schlömerkemper, 2017). Helsper uses the term "antinomies," which stems from the Greek terms for "against/counter" and "law," indicating a discrepancy between two opposites which appears as incommensurable. Pedagogic practice, Helsper argues, per se entails a choice between different options, each demanding to be given prominence and each encompassing a different range of specific teaching and learning goals, strategies, techniques and practical steps.

In several publications (e.g., Helsper, 2002, 2007, 2010), Helsper has conceptualized several aspects of this matrix of frequently unsolvable systemic and anthropological or sociocultural "entanglements." To refer to two essential pedagogic antinomies, for instance, a central antinomy in pedagogy is that of whether students are meant to be given a general education in the sense of striving for personal growth or whether they should be trained in a manner which makes them suitable subjects for a market-driven, commercial society (*Bildung* vs. *Ausbildung*). Another antinomy is reflected in the question of whether students should be educated in a manner that stresses their self-determined development and individualism. This could, for example, be practiced in cooperative learning environments or autonomous learning projects. The opposite stance would be that learners should be taught to fit in neatly and become a well-functioning part of a community. In this case, teaching discipline and exposing students to socialization processes would be favored.

At the core of Helsper's publications is the following two-fold argument: first, that current approaches to pedagogy and teaching focusing on output optimization, standard orientation and objective assessment fall short of the realities of the self-contradictory, inherently paradoxical and antinomical nature of teaching and learning frameworks. Second, Helsper's skepticism towards clear-cut concepts of "good teaching and learning" needs to be seen as expressing an extremely critical position against the current paradigm of quantitative empirical approaches. As Helsper implies, serious concerns need to be voiced with regard to market-oriented ideologies of measuring and assessing in educational contexts. Calling for a reconsideration of facile optimization paradigms, Helsper

admonishes his readers not to disregard the insurmountable challenges inherent in teaching and learning and in education. Finally, taking the concept of antinomies seriously implies a challenge for every researcher and educator to find a way out of the double bind of accepting these oppositions nonchalantly with shrugging indifference or to actively find a position through careful and considerate reflection.

In the context of inter- and transcultural learning, Helsper's category of "pedagogic action as formed by the contradictions of cultural pluralisms" (transl. L.V.)<sup>5</sup> is of specific interest (Helsper, 2010, pp. 22ff.).

„Die Spannung einer Vervielfältigung von Lebensformen einerseits und übergreifenden kulturellen Generalisierungen andererseits kennzeichnet das Pluralisierungsparadoxon der modernisierten Kultur. Die Spannung einer einheitlichen, integrierenden und einer differenzierenden Orientierung pädagogischen Handelns wird damit komplizierter: Denn pädagogisches Handeln muss in übergreifende kulturelle Prinzipien einführen, kann dies aber nur in der generalisierenden Form universalistischer Prinzipien. [...] Aus dem relativierenden Nebeneinander vielfältiger Lebensführungsoptionen resultiert auch eine Infragestellung der Erziehung zu konkreten Lebensformen und damit eine umfassende Erziehung der ganzen Person.“ (Helsper, 2010, pp. 22, 30)<sup>6</sup>

#### 4 Antinomies of inter- and transcultural learning

It may be stressed that such contradictory phenomena of highly differentiated societies are not of necessity absolutely incompatible –as argued by Schlömerkemper (2017), who discusses several options of how to deal with them in teaching/learning scenarios, such as ignoring them, oscillating between two poles or creating a fluent in-between space on a new level. In the context of education, as I pointed out above, pedagogic antinomies ask teachers to position themselves, in their general outlook on teaching and learning ("subjective theories") as well as in concrete teaching scenarios. For the EFL classroom, the concept of antinomies as an intricate matrix of dichotomies in teaching goals and practices can be conceptualized in terms of several challenges with a special regard to inter- and transcultural learning. In Volkmann (2019), I have suggested seven central antinomies with regard to teaching literature in EFL. Here is a similar short tabular survey of ten key antinomies with a special regard to inter- and transcultural learning:

*Table 1: Ten central antinomies of inter- and transcultural learning*

1	<i>Focus on Inner-Circle English, that is valorizing British and/or American English, while introducing the students to other variants in a moderate manner</i>	<i>Acceptance of lingua franca tendencies, with less emphasis on correct native-speaker-like proficiency</i>
2	<i>Focus on target cultures and their specific topics and intercultural learning with a special focus on the "core countries"</i>	<i>Focus on "global issues" and transcultural learning</i>

<sup>5</sup> The original reads: "pädagogisches Handeln in den Spannungen kultureller Pluralisierung".

<sup>6</sup> "There is a tension between the multiplication of ways of life on the one side and overarching cultural generalizations on the other. This marks the paradox of pluralization in modern culture. The tension of a unified, integrative and differentiated orientation of pedagogic action thus becomes more complicated. For pedagogic action needs to introduce to overarching cultural principles, yet can only do this in the generalizing form of universal principles. The relativizing unconnected array of multiple lifestyle options results in a general querying of education for concrete ways of life and an encompassing education of the whole person." (Transl. L.V.)

3	<i>Focus on (basic) factual knowledge and/or background knowledge about certain cultures</i>	<i>Focus on “procedural knowledge” in the sense that competences are furthered without a focus on a specific culture</i>
4	<i>Literary literacy as a valorizing and prioritizing of traditional reading skills, with an emphasis not just on skimming and scanning techniques, but crucially on skills of interpreting and analyzing</i>	<i>Multiliteracies in the sense of the New London Group’s (2000) valorizing of diverse and different visual-textual sources, with less emphasis on traditional print material and cognitive reading skills</i>
5	<i>Critical-analytical approaches, with teachers honing students’ cognitive skills with a focus on specific texts and text analysis</i>	<i>Creative and productive activities in the context of dealing with “texts,” thus favoring less guided student-orientation, motivation and using texts as material for the students’ own multimedia productions</i>
6	<i>Focus on one text, that is how one (literary) text tackles the topic(s) it deals with through the use of rhetorical devices; other texts are used to broaden the perspective on this central text</i>	<i>Focus on textual interplay, that is a focus on how texts work as part of a text ensemble consisting of different media and modes, often with a thematic focus</i>
7	<i>Developing critical-analytical skills as a cognitive, less pleasure-driven activity, which like any skill needs to be practiced and honed</i>	<i>Creating an interest in “reading” for pleasure – not just literary texts, but also visual media, as windows on the world and on culture(s)</i>
8	<i>Literature as a critique of culture(s) – frequently a critique which is not appreciated in its own cultural context</i>	<i>Literature as a window on other cultures – providing an inside perspective for readers from other cultures</i>
9	<i>Critical and reflective stances towards cultural phenomena which appear as problematic or unacceptable</i>	<i>Empathy as an important goal of intercultural learning</i>
10	<i>Dialogue with the other only as a “critical dialogue”</i>	<i>Understanding the other in the sense of Bredella’s <i>Fremdverstehen</i></i>

My suggestions may be regarded as a tentative attempt to transfer Helsper’s concept to the field of EFL with regard to cultural aspects. When it comes to general issues of EFL, I can only refer to an array of ongoing debates about learning vs. acquisition, the role of grammar vs. vocabulary learning, the unresolved issue of “fluency before accuracy” with regard to assessment practices, the debate about whether the best teacher is a native speaker or a non-native “intercultural speaker,” and so on (see the chapter “Challenges of the Teaching Profession” in Grimm et al., 2015).

## 5 Two paradigmatic antinomies

In the context of this contribution on the antinomies of inter- and transcultural learning I would like to hone in on the two last-mentioned dichotomies in Table 1, both relating to the central issue under discussion here. It is the issue of “understanding the other,” including elements of respect, empathy, solidarity on the one side and keeping a critical, reflective distance on the other. The two antinomies under discussion here are, first, the focus on literature as an invitation to immerse oneself into the world or thoughts of a different culture’s protagonist vs. interpreting a piece of literature as a critique of certain cultural practices. Second, I would like to briefly outline a problem inherent in recent suggestions to favor global issues, specifically ecological issues in the foreign language classroom. Favoring ecological issues in class could jar with demands for critical approaches to cultural issues in general.

First, to the issue of understanding the other specifically with the help of literature: it has been empirically proven that reading fiction rather than non-fiction, such as expository texts, has the propensity to engage readers in acts of identification and empathy (cp. Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011; Oatley, 2011; Carocciolo, 2013). First-person narrations and the staging of scenes from a play, where students adopt a character’s role and are asked to see the world through his or her eyes, have the inherent benefit of providing such potent identificatory effects. In Germany, the entire approach of *Fremdverstehen* through literature is based exactly on the premise that there is an innate correlation between being able to change, coordinate and negotiate perspectives when reading literature on the one hand and when dealing with – to use an old metaphor – the book of life on the other (cp. Bredella, 1996, 2004, 2010). Here are two exemplary quotes by experts in the field of teaching literature in EFL:

“But cannot a reader empathize with the plight of Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne without being a woman or a Puritan, and vicariously drift down the Mississippi with Huck Finn and Nigger [sic!] Jim without being an American or an expert on the ante-bellum South?” (Freese, 1996, p. 167)

“[R]eaders can live through the traumatic experience of [fictional] [...] characters from a relatively secure position. Furthermore, participation in these secondary worlds may help readers develop empathy with and solidarity for the characters portrayed. Thus, such an aesthetic response also has a strong ethical dimension.” (Delanoy, 2005, p. 57)

However, as a caveat it can be surmised that these invitations to slip into the minds of protagonists can have detrimental effects. This needs to be balanced with critical approaches, which in some cases can be incommensurable. They can be incommensurable if the reader is faced with two opposing demands: for instance, the protagonist of a novel needs to be responded to with empathy as a – for example – discriminated against member of a minority. This can jar with the demands of analyzing a text critically, revealing how a text manipulates feelings through narrative devices such as an unreliable narrator. Literary texts reveal examples galore of the necessity not to fall into the trap of this emphatic fallacy. Take, for example, the following lines from a rock song:

“Please allow me to introduce myself  
I’m a man of wealth and taste  
I’ve been around for a long, long year  
[...]  
Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name  
But what’s puzzling you is the nature of my game”  
(The Rolling Stones, 1969).

Of course, I have left out the nastier and revelatory lines in which lyricist and singer Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones uses the persona of the Devil to darkly ingratiate himself to his audience in the hit song “Sympathy for the Devil.” Clearly, literature can also



reveal how attempts to create empathy are used to manipulate our feelings. In our era of “fake news” or “alternative facts” in a “post-truth” society, fictional models can therefore not only serve to create empathy but, moreover and sometimes in a conflicting manner, to provide insights into the mechanisms of manipulation and lies in verbal statements and in the media. In the words of Robert Scholes, this could further the ability of students to understand and work with “the codes (linguistic, generic, ideological) that constituted the situations of the texts they have chosen to interpret” (Scholes, 1985, p. 165). This could lead to a sense of empowerment, as Scholes posits: “Textual power is ultimately power to change the world.” (ibid.)

What Scholes calls “textual power” as a critical approach to texts is indeed still in need when it comes to a recently influential field in the area of global learning, global issues or transcultural learning. The approach of “eco-didactics” or eco-pedagogy has gained considerable ground, propelled by movements like Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion. In the EFL classroom, given the pressing nature of ecological issues, the challenge arises to give ecological approaches and topics center stage. This was already posited two decades ago in the following exemplary quote:

“In the context of the ecological crisis a single-minded preoccupation with sexist and capitalist-imperialist critical discourse analysis is rather like addressing the problem of who is going to fetch the deck-chairs on the Titanic, and who has the right to sit in them.” (Goatly, 2000, p. 277)

However, in a critical response to theories of ecocriticism and eco-pedagogy, Parham has pointed out that such a single-minded approach could jeopardize “a democratic classroom practice that encourages free expression and allows students to draw upon their own experiences and perspectives in adapting and critiquing their learning” (Parham, 2006, p. 7). Environmental education may tend to be monologic by suggesting clear-cut and cut-and-dry solutions to complex problems and thus endanger the project of modernity (Habermas, 1981):

“This fact, that environmental education is regarded by many of its practitioners as a matter of raising awareness by fostering the ‘correct’ sympathies, values and imagination, implies that humanities disciplines such as literary and cultural studies have an important contribution to make to an education founded on environmental principles.” (Parham, 2006, p. 9)

Taking a stance or keeping one’s critical distance, even pointing out the dangers of one-sided commitments – such antinomies remain at the core of inter- and transcultural learning and teaching. Helsper himself calls for a reflective and distanced approach to the antinomies teachers are faced with: “Allerdings wird darauf insistiert, dass das Lehrerhandeln anfällig für Verwicklungen ist und dass es gerade einer gelassenen, reflexiven Haltung im Umgang damit bedarf.” (Helsper, 2007, p. 570)<sup>7</sup>

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this contribution, the present prioritizing of attitudes such as tolerance and openness, empathy, difference, diversity, decentering and accepting ambivalences (“ambivalence tolerance”) needs to be accompanied by two caveats. As Antor points out, “behind the facades of openness and tolerance, there sometimes still lurk old entrenched attitudes of Anglocentrism and the exclusionary strategies that result from them” (Antor, 2010, p. 11). Additionally, the call for empathy in pedagogical contexts needs to be put into perspective with respect to how its darker, manipulative forces can come into play (e.g., taking sides without cognitive reflection and the trend towards “us”- vs. “them”-oppositions). There is also the danger of turning a blind eye to unacceptable ways of thinking such as misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, islamophobia and rigid religious fundamentalisms of any ilk. Engaging in a dialogue with the other and understanding the other’s perspectives clearly need

<sup>7</sup> “However, it is to be stressed that teacher action is liable to be subjected to entanglement and therefore specifically needs a detached, reflective approach to this.” (Transl. L.V.)

to find their limitations here. This definitely is the point where antinomies need to be disregarded by taking an outspoken moral and ethical stance.

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