



## **Bridging Borders with a Project-based Approach to Enhance Bidirectional Cultural Awareness in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning**

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Received 23/05/2024	<b>ABSTRACT</b>  Cultural awareness is essential in foreign language education. This paper explores two projects that exemplify the integration of cultural elements into foreign language learning involving both first language (L1) and second language (L2) cultures. The first project was initiated in the course “German Cinema”. It focuses on the legendary English-language sketch “Dinner for One”, which has been part of traditional New Year’s Eve entertainment in the German-speaking world for over sixty years. Students explored its significance within German culture through surveys, translation, creative adaptations and organised an imaginary festival. These activities foster intercultural dialogue and understanding. The second project, “Die goldene Meergundel” (The Golden Goby), is an extracurricular activity that integrates Thai culture with the German language. A Thai fairy tale was performed in Likay-style theatre, but was spoken and sung entirely in German. The blending of Thai folklore with German pronunciation can enhance both cross-cultural appreciation and linguistic proficiency. These case studies underscore the significance of enhancing bidirectional cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning. Educators can act as facilitators by
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	<p>engaging students in projects that transcend linguistic boundaries, effectively bridging cultural borders, and cultivating foreign language learners to be equipped with intercultural competence and global citizenship.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> cultural awareness, project-based learning, foreign language teaching and learning, German as a foreign language</p>
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## Introduction

Language and culture are intricately intertwined, influencing and shaping each other. In the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, the significance of culture should not be overlooked. According to Byram and Grundy (2003), culture in language teaching and learning is usually defined pragmatically as the culture associated with the language being learned. Thus, for effective communication and comprehension of a foreign language, learners must not only master the grammatical rules and vocabulary but also understand the cultural contexts in which the language is embedded.

Cultural awareness can facilitate or even accelerate foreign language acquisition. When learners engage with cultural artifacts such as literature, music, films, and art, they encounter language in its natural habitat. These are “cultural tools” in teaching and learning about culture (Boylan & Huntley, 2003, p. 41). The immersive experience in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language reinforces vocabulary acquisition, grammar comprehension, and linguistic fluency. For example, the target language’s culture can be integrated as content in the textbooks to teach grammar and vocabulary, while it can provide different topics for listening and speaking exercises. Additionally, cultural awareness can lead to intercultural awareness and finally, successful intercultural communication, as Baker (2012) discussed on culture in English language teaching.

Exposure to different cultures also helps broaden learner’s perspectives and foster intercultural competence. However, intercultural competence should not refer to only the culture of the target language. Involving both languages and cultures (L1 and L2) bidirectionally should also be considered since intercultural competence is seen as the ability to cope with one’s own cultural background in interactions with others (Beneke, 2000, as cited by Bandara 2011, p. 45). Grigorian et al. (2018) point out that an intercultural approach to language teaching comprises the following principles: awareness of one’s own culture; study of the target language culture; and comparison of the cultures under consideration. In this aspect, Byram and Huntley (2003) also stated that a reasonably sound knowledge of their native language and culture can be used as a springboard to understand

the attitudes, behaviour, and customs of people from other languages and cultures by identifying similarities and differences. Interestingly, native culture in foreign language teaching is also addressed in English language teaching (ELT) research in Thailand, for example in the study on culture in English listening and speaking materials used at Thai universities by Rattanawong and Thongrin (2023). It was found that varieties of cultural content, especially local and deep culture are not sufficiently represented.

Based on the above-mentioned concepts, this paper aims to present and discuss two different projects that exemplify the integration of cultural components into teaching German as a foreign language (GFL) to Thai students and enhance bidirectional cultural awareness which provides a good basis for intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. The first case delves into a project that deals with an English-language sketch which is a traditional New Year's Eve entertainment in the German culture. The project-based learning was initiated as a part of the course German Cinema after introducing this sketch as part of television culture in German-speaking countries. The second project is an extracurricular activity that integrates Thai culture with the German language where the students' awareness of their own culture was combined with the German language competency via script writing and performing. These two projects dealing with both German and Thai cultures bidirectionally serve as examples of how to bridge the borders between the two languages and cultures involved while enhancing cultural awareness among learners. The development, implementation, results, and implications will be analysed and discussed in the following sections.

### ***Dinner for One* as a Course Project**

*Dinner for One*, also known by its German title “Der 90. Geburtstag” (The 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday) is a famous British comedy sketch that has gained significant popularity in German-speaking countries, particularly in Germany. It is an 18-minute sketch filmed by Northern German Broadcasting (Norddeutscher Rundfunk-NDR) in 1963 in Germany. Since the year of its existence, it has been screened every year as part of the German New Year's Eve celebration, and remarkably, in its original English version. *Dinner for One* is, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, the most frequently repeated TV programme ever.

The sketch features an elderly upper-class English woman named Miss Sophie celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. However, her friends invited as guests for this dinner (Sir Toby, Admiral von Schneider, Mr. Pommeroy, and Mr. Winterbottom) have all passed away. At the table, James, the butler, does the service not only for Miss Sophie, but also for these four invisible guests,

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and he must also impersonate each of them, leading to humourous situations as he drinks multiple toasts in their stead.

The importance of *Dinner for One* to German culture lies in its status as a cultural phenomenon. The film's refrain, "The same procedure as last year, madam?" asked by James and Miss Sophie's answer "The same procedure as every year, James" serves as a nostalgic reminder of past times and is cherished as an endearing part of New Year's Eve celebration as an annual tradition in German-speaking countries. Besides, *Dinner for One* itself is a unique example of Anglo-German cultural exchange since the repetitive script supports its accessibility to German people of different ranges of knowledge of English. Through this sketch, many Germans can gain access to a prestige brand "British Homour" (Ritchie & Harris 2007, p. 78).

*Dinner for One* has already been used as material for GFL teaching about German culture. In the summer semester of 2016, for example, a project seminar entitled "The same procedure as last year? – Film didactics GFL meets theatre pedagogy" was offered at the Freiburg University of Education. As part of this seminar, the sketch *Dinner for One* was analysed and didacticized from a theatre pedagogical perspective and a film booklet with various tasks was produced (Hahn & Trischler, 2017).

In the past, the sketch had also been a project in the course "German Cinema" at Silpakorn University, Thailand. In this course, students were given the chance to do projects in different forms leading to fruitful results. These projects can be classified into four types: providing information, analysis of film motifs, language skill development, and production of creative works (see also Attaviriyupap, 2013). Especially the analytical thinking they developed through their projects could later contribute to their solid background in research. *Dinner for One* belongs to their projects in 2007, as a student wanted to present the history and schedules of this sketch in different TV programmes on the New Year Eve's holiday.

In September 2022, at a dinner with some German and international academics in Germany, there was accidentally a conversation about a funny idea of presenting *Dinner for One* in different languages at a marketplace in a German city. Later, as I told the students in the course about this conversation and let them see the sketch video, they became very interested and came up with the idea of a *Dinner for One* project conducted by the whole class. In the framework of this project, all course participants (35 students in total) decided to work on an imaginary festival of *Dinner for One* lasting for one week. Although the festival was not organised in reality, the students had to prepare related materials. They selected the leader of the class and grouped themselves into several subgroups to be responsible for specific tasks including:

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1. Researching the background, history, screening schedules, and all updates of the sketch *Dinner for One*;
2. Surveying the reception of *Dinner for One* (with German-speaking and Thai audiences);
3. Translating the sketch *Dinner for One* into Thai and producing a dubbed version of it;
4. Writing a script for the short film “*Dinner for One* in Thai Style” which was a creative adaptation based on the original version and producing this short film;
5. Making a photo book *Dinner for One* based on the Thai adaptation;
6. Designing a poster for PR material and preparing the exhibition boards using the content from their research survey results.

The programme of the imaginary *Dinner for One* Festival covering all the tasks listed above was as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> day: Opening of the exhibition “60th Anniversary of *Dinner for One*” (The exhibition was scheduled for the whole week.)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> day: Screening of *Dinner for One* (original version)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> day: Screening of *Dinner for One* (original version dubbed in Thai)
- 4<sup>th</sup> day: Screening of the Thai adaptation of *Dinner for One* & Behind the scenes
- 5<sup>th</sup> day: Presentation of the photo book *Dinner for One*
- 6<sup>th</sup> day: Panel discussion with the production team of the Thai adaptation of *Dinner for One* & quiz activities with prizes
- 7<sup>th</sup> day: Screening of *Dinner for One* in all 3 versions and closing activities

Parts of the project outcomes are shown in Figure 1–2.

Since the students had to organise the whole project and distribute the tasks among themselves, the instructor functioned only as a facilitator. For example, after the students had brainstormed their ideas about the project, they were advised how to do a questionnaire in both languages, there were also consulting sessions via line conversations or face-to-face meetings with the instructor on the development of a working plan and process.

Through this project, the students learned to work independently, but at the same time developed their interpersonal competence. They have experienced the different dimensions of the reception of this sketch which has been a national cult for more than 60 years and is perceived differently amongst Thais who are familiar with German culture. The research the students carried out on the sketch, *Dinner for One*, also provided an opportunity to foster intercultural dialogue and to have a better understanding of German culture better. The different tasks they performed supported their competency in German both in terms of the language

(through translating and subtitling) and in terms of culture (through researching and producing exhibits and research results).

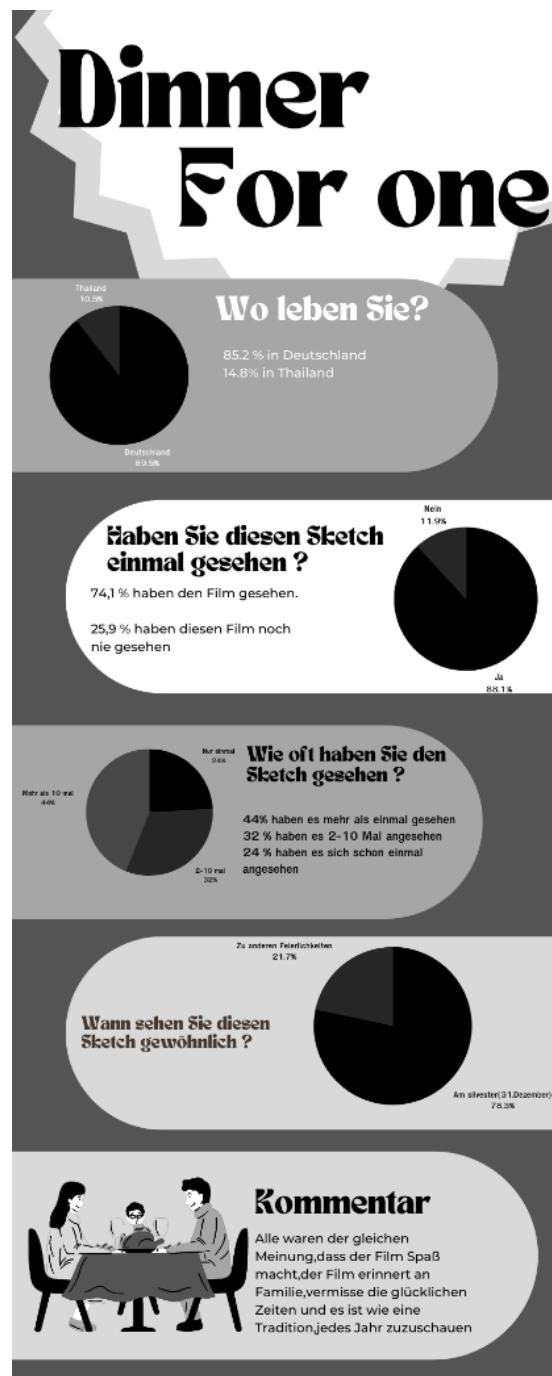
**Figure 1**

*Poster for the Screening of the Thai Adaptation*



Figure 2

*One Board of the Exhibition Showing the Survey Results*



## **“Die Goldene Meergrundel” (The Golden Goby) as an Extracurricular Likay Project**

Likay is a traditional form of Thai folk performance that combines elements of music, dance, and drama. It originated in rural areas of Thailand and is characterised by vibrant costumes, lively music, and exaggerated gestures. Likay performances often incorporate comedic elements and improvisation, engaging the audience in interactive storytelling. It plays a vital role in preserving Thai cultural heritage. Usually, Likay performances depict moral tales, historical events, or folk legends, conveying important cultural values and teachings to audiences. When performed at annual events, temple fairs, or other festive occasions, Likay performers would dress in glittering costumes, beautifully sing their parts in rhymes, and dance gracefully to Thai melodies on the stage.

The Department of German at Silpakorn University has conducted several projects integrating Thai culture with the German language since 2012. Likay performance in German is one of them. In August 2012, the first Likay performed in the German language was *Aschenputtel* (Cinderella). The performance was a contribution to the celebration of the 150 years of German-Thai diplomatic relations. Two years later, *Sissi*, the second Likay performance in German, was performed on the university campus. The year 2022 marked the 160<sup>th</sup> year of the German-Thai diplomatic relations. Thus, the department produced the third Likay piece in German, “Die Meergrundel” (*Pla Boo Thong*, engl. *The Golden Goby*), to celebrate this occasion. Unlike the two previous Likay projects, this performance was not initiated for a live audience, but for a VDO recording streamed via the department’s Facebook Live.

*The Golden Goby* is a captivating tale of love, betrayal, and redemption. It tells the story of Auey, whose mother is transformed into a golden fish after being killed by her husband. Through a series of reincarnations and magical interventions, she seeks help from a fairy and ultimately finds solace and reconciliation. This project, which presented a Thai folk tale as a Likay performance in the German language, was a cooperation between myself as the project leader and some volunteer students conducted through the following steps:

1. Script development;
2. Casting;
3. Online rehearsals and one online workshop on Likay singing via Zoom
4. Organising of costume and venue, staff recruitment;

5. One-week on-campus rehearsals and a one-day preparation workshop on Likay singing and dancing;
6. Video recording;
7. Editing, subtitling, and production of introducing video (with the Head of the German Department, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Producer, and welcoming greetings by the German Ambassador to Thailand);
8. Premiere screening via Facebook Live.

This Likay project was an extracurricular activity and the participants joined voluntarily. The script of this Likay performance was written as a project for the course named “German Structure” in the first semester of the academic year of 2018. The course participants performed this story in the German language, but not in Likay form. Afterwards, they were encouraged to produce their own Likay script in order to analyse the structure of the German language. The ten students had the chance to learn a form of creative writing by integrating Thai culture with the German language. After four years, eight performers for the Likay production in 2022 were cast from the course “German Phonetics”. Before the project was launched, volunteer performers were sought and after that each role was assigned based on their pronunciation profile and personal character.

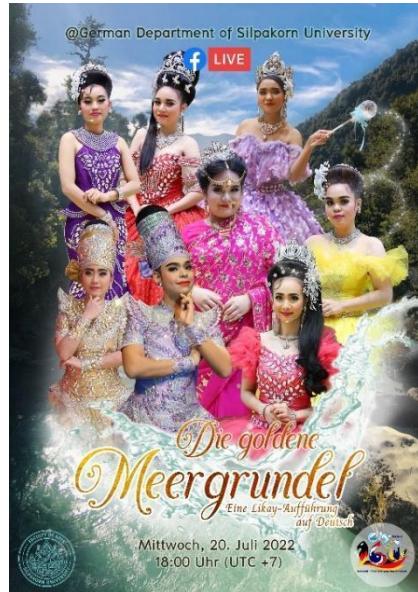
Since the rehearsals began during the vacation and all the students were in different parts of Thailand, we met via Zoom and rehearsed in the first two months focusing mostly on understanding the German script and pronunciation. Another group of volunteers consisting of four students from another class were recruited later as we rehearsed at the campus one week before the video recording on 23 June 2022.<sup>1</sup> The participants of this project also took over some tasks to help the project run smoothly, such as producing teasers, posters, and subtitles.

Two main outcomes of the project in terms of cultural awareness and GFL learning were identified: enhanced cross-cultural appreciation and improved linguistic proficiency. The participants all gave very positive feedback as they evaluated the project at the end via an anonymous Google form. The performers' mentioned that their German proficiency became better through memorizing the script and speaking and singing practice trained by both Thai and German teachers. The supporting volunteers were proud of their contribution to this cultural event, while the musicians considered the performance as a unique intercultural experience. Moreover, the video impressed a big audience.<sup>2</sup> It was beyond expectations that our students had the chance to perform this German Likay piece again three months later. Sponsored by the German Embassy, the troupe was invited to perform at the annual conference of the German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG). Figure 3 shows

the poster of the video screening, while Figure 4 captures a scene from the above-mentioned live performance.

**Figure 3**

*Poster of the Screening of the Likay “Die goldene Meergrundel”*



**Figure 4**

*A Scene From the Live Performance of “Die goldene Meergrundel”*



## Implications

These two projects are examples of integrating cultural elements into GFL teaching to enhance bidirectional cultural awareness. This means that while providing the learners with the German language and culture, the learners can also be mediators of this foreign culture in their homeland. At the same time, they can serve as ambassadors of their own culture to native speakers of German or even other people worldwide who learn German as a foreign language. In this project-based approach, educators may reduce their role as lecturers providing one-way knowledge transmission and change their role to facilitators in bridging language and cultural borders.

Intercultural competence has recognized, discussed, and integrated into the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram et al. 2002). While the results from the first project *Dinner for One* focused more on knowledge of the German-speaking culture, the attitudinal aspect was also involved, since the study endearing popularity of the film shed light on understanding the foreign language culture. The skills in using the German language were not highlighted in this case due to the character of the course “German Cinema” itself which normally serves as a culture/literature course.<sup>3</sup> The students’ skills of German were developed more clearly in the second project, especially regarding script writers and later the performers. However, it was clear that the two projects presented in this paper confirmed the possibility of the construct of intercultural competence via raising cultural awareness through both classroom and extracurricular activities.

*Dinner for One* itself has a multicultural facet and can provide intercultural dialogues. Ritchie and Harris (2007) analyse the German view of British humour and use this sketch as a phenomenon of “brotherly love” since British manners are a highly esteemed in Germany. Videos of *Dinner for One* dubbed in Standard German and in various German dialects such as Schwäbisch (Swabian), Kölsch (Cognian), Hessisch (Hessian) are available on YouTube and can be used as materials in GFL classrooms at different levels. A good concrete example of using *Dinner for One* for teaching German as a foreign language was the case of the Freiburg University of Education (Hahn & Trischler 2017) since *Dinner for One* was developed as material for teaching German even at the beginner level (A1).

Developing intercultural competence involves recognising and examining one’s cultural assumptions and biases, as well as acknowledging the diversity of cultural perspectives that exist beyond one’s own. By cultivating self-awareness and curiously about other cultures, individuals can develop the skills needed to navigate cross-cultural interactions effectively,

such as empathy, flexibility, open-mindedness, and adaptability. This concept of this paper is also in line with Mikhaleva and Régnier (2014) who mentioned a parallel study of native and target-language cultures with teachers' role as cultural mediators. The role of local culture and even the cultures of the neighbouring regions was also addressed in teaching English as found in the study of Shrestha (2016). This may also show a new trend in the field of foreign language teaching and learning as the world becomes more connected.

The project "Die Meergrundel" can also show the potential of combining learners' native culture with the new language and culture they are now actively engaging in. The knowledge gained from this kind of project can also equip learners with tools to develop other projects in the real world, especially if they have the chance to be involved in the cultural promotion sector at the international level. Exchanging one's culture through a global language like English or German can also support the development of German for global communication in the same way as the status of English as a lingua franca that leads to a less important role of monolingual native speakers (see also Baker 2012). In the case of German, it can also serve as a foreign language used to communicate across diverse cultures among native and non-native speakers. The video of "Die Meeresgundel" was also used as part of an international project conducted across several countries on analogue and digital teaching under the auspices of the Alumni Academy of Siegen, Germany in 2022 titled "Blended Learning across an International Network (Premawardhena et al. 2024). This also shows the potential of using a foreign language to share one's culture with others outside the same society.

Both projects presented here also have academic implications. As academicians, we may begin from practice to theory and back again and again as a circle. The process of Kramsch (2003) on the concept of "Ausländer" (foreigner) in German discussed in her GFL classroom which later became a research project with data from learners in three different countries can also be applied to *Dinner for One* or the Likay project. Topics such as the reception of *Dinner for One* among the young generation of Germans as raised by Ritchie and Harris (2007) might also be researched and the comparison of the reception of *Dinner for One* among audiences from different cultures could also be worth exploring. At the same time, the reception and perception of the German version of the Likay performance "Die Meergrundel" is also possible as a research topic. Although all the above-mentioned ideas were not put into practice at the time both projects were conducted, there were discussions with all the participants at the end of the projects to explore and discuss these possibilities to ensure that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to intercultural awareness and competence were effectively conveyed.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to discuss the potential and possibilities of enhancing cultural awareness in foreign language education through a project-based approach. By discussing the potential to promote cultural awareness in a bidirectional direction, German to Thai and vice versa, both of the projects could be of use to other GFL instructors or those of other foreign languages to implement similar projects in their teaching practices.

Starting from the imaginary festival of *Dinner for One* presented in this paper, I thus would like to end by proposing two possible events that could also highlight the concept of bidirectional cultural awareness to bridge borders in foreign language teaching and learning, especially in the case of GFL. The first one is an International *Dinner for One* Festival in learners' countries with the sketch dubbed in L1 of GFL learners and discussions on this special German phenomenon as the focus. In this form, learning GFL would contribute to the dissemination of German culture. The second suggestion concerns the reverse direction. A German festival with traditional performances from L1 cultures spoken or sung in the German language can also be conceivable. German will then be used as a medium to promote the soft power of the home culture of GFL learners. Both kinds of events can also be applied to other pairs of native and foreign languages.

Finally, integrating cultural awareness into foreign language education holds immense transformative potential, for both the individuals and the society. With a rich tapestry of cultural practices, beliefs, and perspectives associated with both their native and foreign languages and cultures, foreign language learners can not only develop their linguistic proficiency but can also be empowered to navigate multicultural landscapes with empathy, respect, and curiosity. In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency and cross-cultural competence are valuable assets. By engaging students in projects that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, educators can effectively bridge borders by enhancing cultural awareness, and cultivate foreign language learners to be equipped with intercultural competence and global citizenship.

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### About the Author

**Korakoch Attaviriyupap:** Professor of German at the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University. She is also the chief editor of the journal *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies* since 2019. She has published widely in Thai, German, and English, both in Thai and international journals. Her scholarly works and research areas are linguistic contrastive studies between German and Thai, translation and second language acquisition, especially singable song translation, and intercultural approach in foreign language learning through the integration of Thai culture with the German language.

### Endnotes

The video of the Likay performance was premiered as a live event via the German Department's Facebook on 20 July 2022. It is also available on YouTube (Attaviriyupap, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> About 100 persons attended the on-site premiere screening in the auditorium of the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University. At the same time, the Facebook live got about 200 Likes, almost 50 comments on the premiere evening during that one hour, 2.7K views later.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that in the curriculum of the Bachelor of German at Silpakorn University, literature and film courses focus more on the analytical thinking than language skills development, i.e. although reading, listening, understanding in German language is expected in the learning outcomes, but the discussion and analysis can also be done in both German and Thai.

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