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Thumbs-up, Red Cross and Nuclear Energy: A case of non-inclusiveness of cultural and linguistic signs in times of globalization

Overview

In a time when we may think that signs have taken on global status, this may however not be the case so easily. This contribution reports on a case study with visual cultural information material which uses purportedly global signs. However, this use runs into difficulties when applied to situations where globalization cannot be taken for granted.

Part one discusses the global relevance of concepts, words, signs and actions.

Part two reports problems with two cases of use of the same visual material.

- on the one hand as guidance with a or for the target group, the incoming immigrants in provincial southern Germany, and

- on the other hand as teaching material for vocabulary in a foreign language learning intercultural context.

Part three compares the problem areas and the background knowledge and their influence on the interpretation of the materials.

Part four summarizes the findings, attempts at theoretically locating the issues and draws conclusions for the use of original materials in foreign language teaching contexts.

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Introduction

Foreign language courses, which usually have to take care of the language and culture of the target language, are usually looking for materials. These can be global or culture-specific. However, even culture-specific materials use global material and concepts as every culture is located in a wider (global?) context. Accordingly, this presentation reports on a case study with visual cultural information material which uses purportedly global signs.

In such a case, material which tries to introduce, even enforce, the specifics of one culture comes in handy for introducing that culture.

However things are not as simple as that as this contribution will try to demonstrate. Since various contentious areas, each of which has its own wealth of literature, are touched upon and mentioning each would be beyond the realm of this paper, we will keep references to a bare minimum.

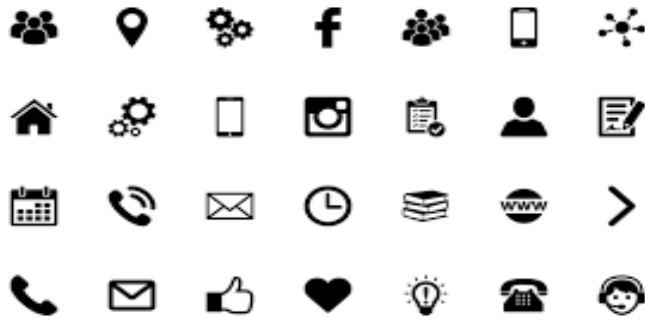
1. The “global relevance” of concepts, words, signs and actions

Without wanting to go too deeply into philosophical discussions, which change very frequently, we still have to take a brief look at some of the following terms. A start for a general discussion can be found here: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept>. Many terms undergo changes in meaning, use and conceptual status. This also affects the resulting differences between them. Let us consider the following three terms:

- words
- signs
- actions

and we can see that to a certain degree the boundaries between them, which seemed to be clear for generations, are far from distinct anymore. Actions can be one’s own actions, they can be orders, so someone else does them, or they can, among others, be prohibited, so that they are not performed. Signs have become more difficult in the digital age. Lets begin with a few members in the following list of signs in table 1.

Table 2: Signs with varying functions (http from google)



For one thing the f in table 1 above for *facebook* is simply a sign, and it will indicate that something is related to facebook, or even that there is a link to that platform. Things are less clear for the thumbs up sign for “like it”. If this sign is sent nowadays, it will complete an action, thus leading to much more than just the f of facebook. The dove for twitter requires knowledge about this bird and the meanings it has been associated with. For many unfamiliar with that background there is just no connection between the sign for a bird, and the word “Twitter”, an action certainly no dove performs. In the same way, perhaps even more dramatic things hold for the camera of instagram. Probably as early as in the next generation, people may wonder, what a camera is, beyond being one of many apps or tools.

“You Tube” for videos requires a quite difficult chain of associations, including at least knowledge about the word tube (“pipe”) being used in colloquial English for the TV (as this used to have a Brown pipe)).

The following sign in table 2 is to many simply an arrangement of red lines so that one is left to right and the other is up to down or vice versa.



Table 2: Two red lines

Only if we redirect our knowledge to these fundamental points can we understand the problems which can arise, if purportedly universal signs are presented to persons for who this may not be the case, as we will see below.

Finally, we can demonstrate the global and local squish between sign, word, concept and action from the following example: The heart sign denotes

- a word: an organ
- a word for a concept: a heart for s.o.

- a concept: niceness
- a place: a toilet in many Western European countries
- an action: in Line: like/love you/it

In summary, while few signs, words and actions may ever have been unambiguous, the digital use of signs has increased the variety of uses and lead to a variety of new conceptual statuses.

2. Problems with two cases of use of the same visual material

In circumstances where different cultures come into contact, be that only as topic in class or in the very real world, graphics and pictures can save lengthy explanations very easily and make them much more effective. It is thus no wonder that identical or similar materials are used when dealing with foreign languages as when dealing with people newly arriving in a foreign country. The following incident reports problems that can arise in such cases.

The material used here below was created to serve point one, but the author thought that it can also be used to demonstrate point two:

- 1) - as guidance with a or for the target group, the incoming immigrants in provincial southern Germany (guidance to behaviour). and
- 2) - as teaching material for vocabulary etc. in a foreign language learning intercultural context (guidance to cultural concepts).

Background

1) The material under consideration here was produced as a visual material as guidance to behavior for refugees. It was produced on order of, by and for the Schwarzwald-Baar-Kreis county in rural Southwestern Germany. In this case it is important to know that every place in Germany has to take in a certain attributed relative number of refugees and other foreigners. In large cities such as Düsseldorf with its 540 000 inhabitants, an increase of 10% newcomers, i.e. about 50 000, does not change the city population constellation that much, as there will still be 450 000 inhabitants from before, and probably be translators for most of the languages of the refugees' home countries. This is completely different in tiny communities of say 1500 people, where still 150 to 200 newcomers have to be taken in. Not only will there only be 1200 from before, but also will the newcomers hardly know anything about the community and how to behave there, and there will almost certainly be no speakers of the newcomers' languages.

Thus there was the task how to cope with various people coming from a variety of cultures. The following table 3 lists areas of contention and proposals of how to solve them.

Table 3: Coping with immigrants

<p>What immigrants bring along <i>Different Languages</i></p>	<p><i>Hunger</i> <i>Ragged clothes</i></p>
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Fear and anxiety

Little Money

Cell phones

Traditional ways of thinking and behaving

How to deal with this (in a culturally acceptable way)

Give food, provide new clothes

Provide a security in a safe haven

Learn German

Provide money or tickets/ cell phones

??? Educating? Inform? Order? Return?

Replace values?

In any case the last problem remaining is the way people think as there is no way to change traditional ways of thinking and behaving. However far you travel, your values remain with you in your head until very last. Thus, not all of the values necessary in one culture may be welcome in another, such as

- violent conflict solution (in many countries and societies non-violence means unexcusable weakness),
- having a fixed opinion about someone or something (important for managing everyday life),
- gender issues (gender differences are not an issue but the cornerstone of many a society) ,
- referring to one's country for justification, etc. : (“I am Japanese, so”) cf. USA: “It's the rule!” “Serve the flag”.

Note that such value concepts are very strong even today and fire e.g. a large movie industry of Japanese *jidaigeki*, stories of historic Japanese figures, even now!

2) The same material was used in a non-beginners' course (2nd to 4th year of volunteer, non-major German) as cultural information. Indeed, background cultural knowledge becomes an important contents part on this level. The material mentioned above was thus also used as teaching material for vocabulary building etc. in a foreign language learning intercultural context (guidance to cultural concepts).

2.1. The visual material: The whole page

The material

The educational material for the refugees consists of a whole book, but only one page was cited in Kulturaustausch 11, 2016, p. 46. On one page, four pages are assembled and the general header is

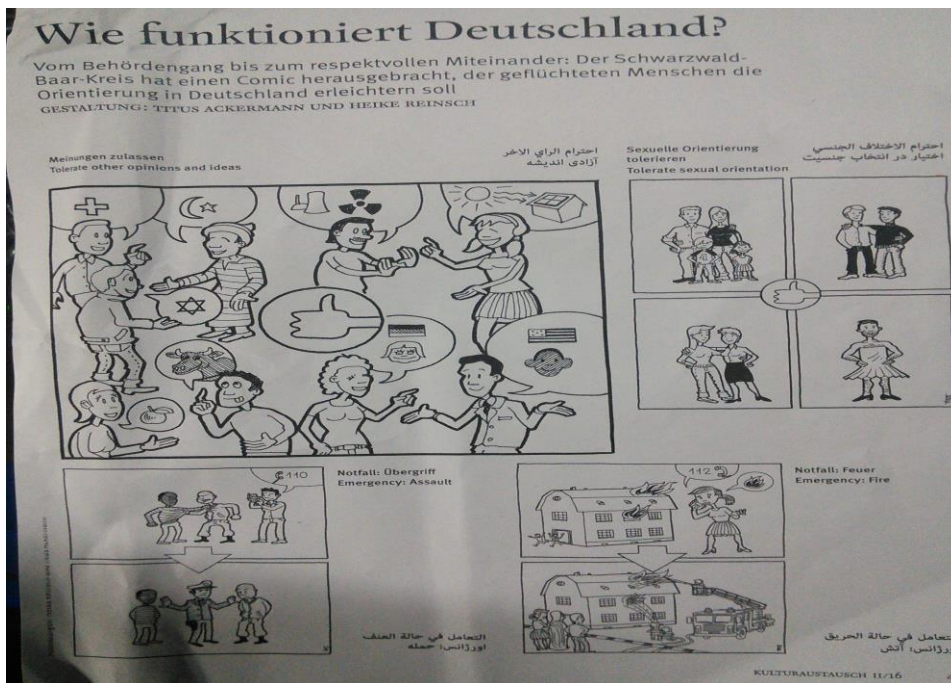
- How does Germany work?/function?/tick etc. ; or simply:
- How to live in Germany

(This topic was later taken up in a series on the official German homepage:

<https://www.deutschland.de/de/so-tickt-deutschland>)

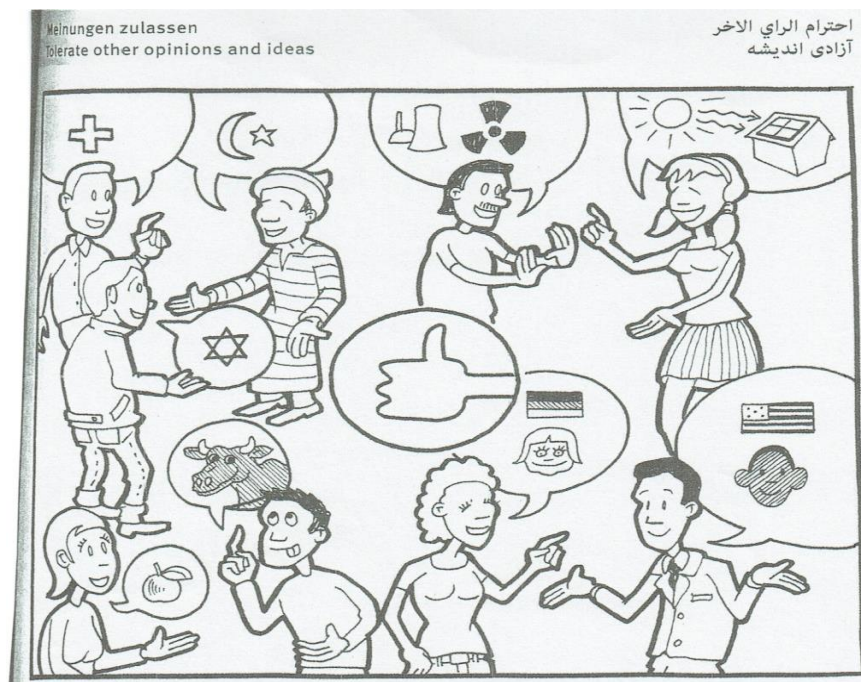
Following the overview page at the end of this part, we will use each one of the sub-pages to demonstrate a few possible misunderstandings. We will also find surprising similarities if this page is used in the Japanese present day university student context.

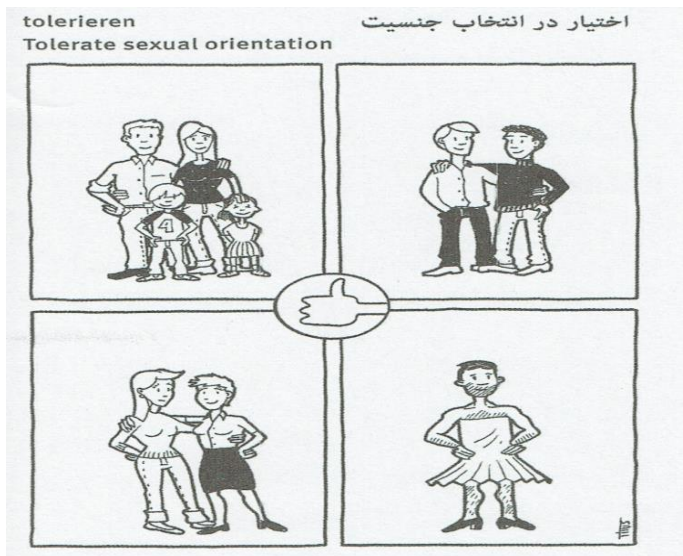
pic 1 here



2.2. The page in separate parts

A) The top left part itself addresses various topics in dialogic scenes here plainly numbered one to four from top left to bottom right



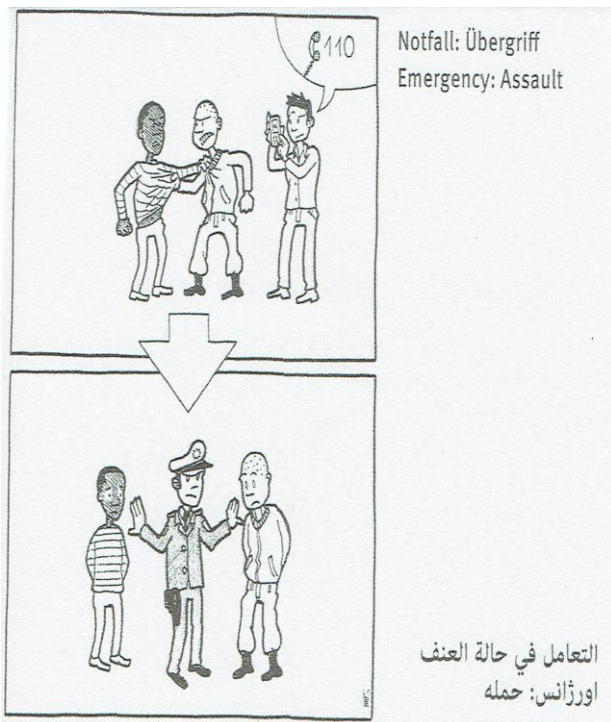


2.3. Top right

B) The top right series deals with only one topic, gender orientation, and will again be numbered one to four from top left to bottom right

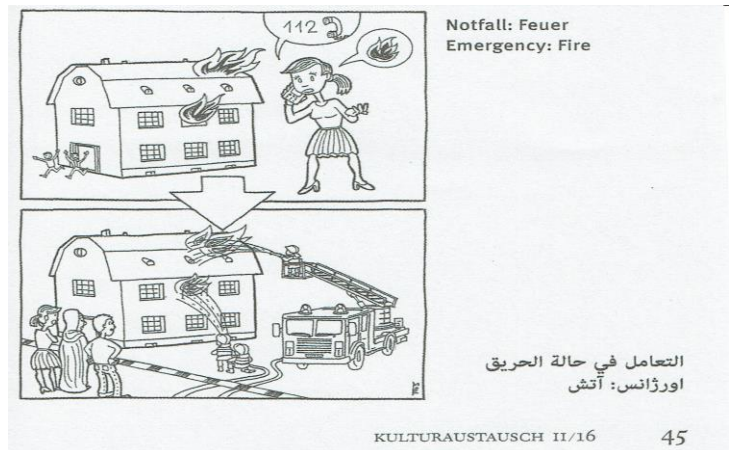
2.4. Lower left

C) For conflict solution, only two graphs are given, one and two:



2.5. Lower right

D) Emergencies are the last pair of pictures, again numbered one and two.



Finally note that all pictures have headers or subtitles in various languages, although they are made in order to surmount the language barrier. English will probably work as a kind of lingua franca for a few, but it is doubtful if this holds in emotional cases such as the ones above. Arabic is common to many, but by far not all refugees, and their circumstances are far from similar: While many could attend school and some even have grades, in many war-ravaged areas even simple schooling, and thus learning any reading or writing, was beyond their reach.

The following point deserves mentioning beyond the language issues, and it demonstrates the difficulties with composing graphic material which is meant to encompass many cultures.

- Thumbs-up is an up-your-ass gesture in some (not all!) middle-Asian countries.
- However, as the cell-phone is the most important medium during their flight, most immigrants will probably know the meaning of the thumbs-up gesture from facebook.

Nevertheless, a common understanding, except in the younger generation. cannot be presupposed.

3. Use as language learning educational material

3.1. Introduction

This part mentions problem areas and background knowledge differences and their influence on the interpretation of educational materials. The discussion here is limited to the use as teaching material in a few cases at one university in Japan, and there may be other issues if the same material is used in similar contexts. The main point is that various issues are not shared in the common knowledge of the learners in the same way, although they are supposed to be widely known in a free society such as Japan with free accessibility to data of any cultural kind (and sometimes even tested in the university entrance examination but obviously forgotten immediately afterwards).

The first and most conspicuous one is the thumbs-up sign, which works in the same way as in the target culture Germany, indicating approval, like and similar actions, i.e. afterwards. However, even now in Germany it is perhaps still is used towards something else as a for wishing someone luck prior to some difficult task.

Another problem results for Japanese in international contacts from the very limited knowledge about world religions, as religion itself does (in both good and bad senses) not play an important part in managing one's everyday life in Japan. Consequently, students cannot be supposed to know much about religions and signs related to them or related to eating habits, although such knowledge is to some degree part of the social studies part at school. Thus, supposedly globally well-known concepts and their meanings cannot be presupposed to be known consciously.

A further point concerns the historical development of issues. While presently corporal punishment is a no-go in many western-oriented countries including Japan, only a few years ago the situation was completely the opposite to say the least. However, present-day students cannot be supposed to know such developmental categories. This will show in the first example discussed below, the red cross.

3.2. Method

In his non-beginners German classes, the author gave the overall comic out to his students. He then asked the following question: What do you think?

If the situation was clear, the mentioned elements were recorded and their German equivalents given. Recordings from both students in the study are used in the explanations below.

If the situation was not clear, the author gave an explanation which tried to make the graphics and the relationships between the elements understandable. Most of the class was conducted in German, although a few terms had to be introduced in Japanese. It should also be noted that the problems mentioned here below very probably pertain to many other cultural differences as well.

3.3. Trying to explain the interpretations given by the students

Top left: The Red Cross

For a start, it is not easily imaginable, what the, although bleached supposedly red, cross in the top left stands for in this comic. This resulted in the need to go into the background.

The Red Cross is a concept in the West: To help (each other);

then: to help, in Christendom, one religion (R1);

For help, Islam uses the green crescent (to the right)

Thus, the green crescent is a sign for this religion (R2)

The star is also the sign for a religion, i.e. Judaism (R3).

Not very much of this has reached Japanese students (except maybe in testing situations):

Many religions are tolerated in Japan, or rather thought of as personal matter of little interest to others (as long as they remain that), and in public strictly following rules is required, requested, and simply ignored if not the case.

The Red Cross is in Japan simply a company in the medical sector. As it is a company, any relationship to help (for free at that) is lost. Then the link to the Swiss flag seems random, as the mutually helping aspect (of the *communitas helvetiae* helping each other) is, again, not linked to this sign. As the religious aspect is lost to this situation, it is unclear, why the Jewish star is there in the same context, if it is recognized as such a sign at all. The confusion is complete when trying to understand why the men with the cross and the six-spiked star turn to the Eskimo with a half moon and a smaller star.

Atomic energy vs solar energy

The top right part poses another problem: As Japan is, despite Fukushima, keen on keeping up and even eager to export atomic energy, the left part appears to students as a fan and a kind of toy. This being the case, mentioning the sun's shining on a roof doesn't make much sense as this is a fact of everyday life in summer in Japan. What the lady is telling to the man is as unclear as why the man with his toys seems to fend this off. Of course, there are discussions on atomic energy in Japan, but rarely do these signs surface nor is the discussion held heatedly. At that, gender may also play a role here. One student, however, recognized the signs and indicated an issue.

Apple and cow

The top bottom left scene poses a secondary problem for which knowledge of some of the above issues is necessary. Plainly speaking, what is the problem with an apple and a cow?

As there are very few open vegetarians in Japan, it is still difficult, to have food preferences come up as an earnest topic (they are however part of the standard set of “safe conversation topics”).

However, enough world knowledge surfaced once the issue was mentioned. The link between food and religions, although mentioned in high school books, is not consciously present.

Nationalities

The lower right part poses another problem. Despite many recent contacts and an increase in overseas travelers coming to and foreigners working in Japan, the triple country=flag=face(=Japan), with each of the three being equally interchangeable, are a given (conceptual unit) for our students.

Any deviation from this is simply a *gaikoku*~ (foreign~). Also, many Westerners still enjoy a high position due to their Westernness, as well as other foreigners being looked down on or simply feared and kept at a distance. Eventually, there are only few persons of different color around in Japan, and as long as one has nothing to do with them, there is no problem. Due to the mentioned estimation, there is still a chance to get a job due to the very fact of being a foreigner in Japan.

This means that in present everyday life in Japan, people of different color (i.e. with outer signs):

- of course, pose no problem as long as there is no personal involvement, and they are as untouchables accepted in many situations. but
- with involvement contacts become problematic (this holds even among Japanese, remember the problems of cars with a Fukushima license plate after the earth quake).

Top right: Sexual orientation

Although news about sexual orientations have surfaced somewhat in the media and raised a few students' interest, this is usually overlaid with everyday associating behavior. Except for that, this topic is a private matter, and there is no reason to show off in public. There is thus no issue with this topic in the comic. It does however leave the question, why this is mentioned (included) at all.

Bottom left: The use of force

In many non-Western cultures, the demonstration of power and the use of force is vital for survival: (Neuland, p. 45). Similar points hold for the US gun culture.

In this regard, the (undeclared! but very effective peace) education with an extremely safe public environment have led to a complete turn-around in the opinion towards the exertion of brute body force.

This results in a complete lack of understanding for the American gun culture (Why the need to defend at all?). Only 30 years ago, the use of bodily force by teachers was considered education in Japan. This is in stark contrast to today's monster parents, so infamous in Germany and Japan. Thus, no bodily force is applied to Japanese students, and there is thus no issue with this picture. This is in stark contrast with the background of many refugees, where forcing women is part of everyday life, and men have to learn that somewhere, e.g. from their own mother. As a further sign of strength, clothes play an important role to demonstrate presence of power and availability of money and strength. Consequently, unbelonged women (e.g. not married at 18), although part of a sign of good integration, e.g. in Germany, pose a family issue and can easily lead to severe plights of the main family back home in the Islamic country. Students were given this explanation when asking how the power issue became part of the poster at all. The author would like to thank his S2 and S3 students for their cooperation.

4. Conclusion

This concluding part summarizes the findings, mentions some of the theoretical background and tries to theoretically locate the issues. It then offers conclusions for the use of original interculturally designed materials in foreign language teaching contexts.

4.1. Findings

Although only a small number of students could be interviewed and the opinions of a larger amount may have led to quite different results, the fact that completely separate interviews in comparably liberal university contexts led to quite similar interpretations hints at deep-lying conceptual similarities, such as

- - concepts are both local and global at the same time (recent development);
 - - words may not convey;
 - - contents learned (remembered) for for example university entry exams does not override everyday knowledge, which holds sway outside the exams;
 - - signs become overriding and increasingly global;
 - - issues considered questionable may be unproblematic and vice versa;
 - - differences may belong to different areas of personal involvement and thus be subject to different requirements in private and public, especially, but not only(!), if religious matters are concerned.
- This may also hold for brute force (gewalt) and for example gun education so rampant in the USA.

This difference also becomes relevant for the immigrants, although this is rarely conscious: While a redefinition of their values seems to be required, independently of whether this is even possible, for outsiders there may not even be problems at all, such as in Germany of 10 years ago.

4.2 Locating the issues

The issues mentioned in this information page appear different according to from which vantage point they are considered.

- we may only know about the target culture, but not very much about the start cultures nor about how target culture elements relate to them;
- there are “ideas” about persons, and we hardly know their characteristics nor their relevance in the start culture and whether they are readily or hardly subject to change in a target culture.
- conflict solution may be quite different, from personal justice to justice personified in a person interpreting religious or other laws to seemingly independent, and thus not necessarily present, laws personified by a police which may be the highest symbol of injustice in the start culture.
- recognizing of issues is not universal. Once an issue has reached a certain level of positive comfortability for the persons possibly involved (such as safety and (although incredibly high) prices in Japan), it may become a non-issue meeting complete un-understanding.

4.3. Hints for using interculturality-intended materials in foreign language classes

A few hints should be mentioned if using interculturality-intended materials in foreign language classes.

For one thing, such materials can be more thought provoking due to the urgency the matters mentioned may have in the start or in the target culture.

On the other hand, for example the following may have to be considered:

- they may not be self-explanatory;
- Landeskunde (culture learning) may not be enough;
- Commons signs may be of great help;
- Redefinitions may be required in local and global contexts as well.

Generalizing still further, we would like to close with two questions:

- What does this mean for designing new language teaching materials/textbooks?
- What does this mean for foreign language learning in general?

Answering these questions may not only help designing more culturally appropriate materials, but also greatly contribute to better mutual understanding.

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