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Are harmless questions really harmless? - Awareness and context-sensitivity in classroom-activities

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Some years ago I had an advanced level class for German with around 12 students and started the first unit with simple questions for warming up. Everybody talked to everybody. And I asked a student: "Haben Sie Geschwister?" ("Do you have brothers and sisters?") And she answered: „Ja, ich habe eine Schwester. Aber sie ist letztes Jahr gestorben.“ ("Yes, I had one sister, but she died last year.")

This was the initial encounter for me, to rethink the kind of questions used in classroom. And there might be more. Even without an earthquake and a tsunami, human tragedy is just right around the corner. This year's events (2011) may have an impact on the awareness of some kind of class-room activities. For starting a new semester, we often start the first lesson with simple, "harmless" questions like "How did you spend your vacation?" "Do have brothers and sisters?" "Please, describe your hometown." "Where is your favorite place?" etc. These questions depend on the language level. But this might turn-out just the opposite. What should a student answer to a question like this, when he or she lost family members, he or she had to evacuate?

This paper wants to reflect the impact and ways to deal with sensitive situations in classroom-activities. How do you deal with "*hazukashi*" / delicate (germ. *peinlichen*) contents in classroom? – There was an intensive and very open discussion about this matter after my speech. I have to thank all participants for their contributions. Here I just want to give a short summary of suggestions for strategies given during the discussion:

- 1) **Tell the students** in the first lesson, that this is an exercise and they may answer honestly, but if they do not want to talk about private things, they should just make up a family or answer with something else.
- 2) Important is to point out that the way of answering should give them self and their class-mates a **fair chance to exercise** their language skills. For example for the telephone number not using 12345 but 12 34 25, so that it seems real to read and understand.
- 3) Make the fake as the default - a dream of a family: today you have the chance to make for yourself **the best family**, you ever dreamed off. "Your

father is a pilot, your sister is a singer, your cousin is CEO of Coca Cola etc. You will apply at Princeton University and get a scholarship. ect.”

- 4) Take from journals, magazines and the internet etc. information of **well known people** and talk about them and their family. “Where do they live? What is the name of her/his daughter.” Make a **role play** and let the students be in the position of these people to exercise I- and you-forms: “My name is Bratt Pit, this is my wife Angela.”
- 5) Developing-**multi** identity **personalities** - every students gives him- or herself some different identities and families, different gender, country, family, which can be used for a set of exercises and role plays, which can be developed during the semester during the exercises. “No, I am not Hiroyuki. I am Susan from New York. I am not a student. I am an office-employee.”
- 6) Give the students the expressions needed, so that they will be able to react properly in situations, they do not want to talk about. “Sorry, but this is private. I really do not want to talk about it. etc.”
- 7) **One lie - one true**: When talking about the vacation the student have to talk about two things, they have done, but one is true and the other is not. The other students have to guess which is real and which not. Everybody does strange things, so this might be a way to accept it.
- 8) Perhaps students **want to talk about** their experience. It might be a chance in a foreign language, because it has more emotional distance. Give vocabulary and expressions to talk about death, joy and other.
- 9) Finally an **important advice**: some universities have regulations about private, individual information. It might be not allowed to use some kind of questions like telephone number, address or questions about the family background in examinations (written or oral), to avoid discrimination or academic harassment.