

Concerning the handbook and workbook

“Foundations and backgrounds”

The first impulse for the present handbook goes back to a sigh by a teacher of a heritage language class (HLT; in Switzerland: HSK): “If we only had something to help orient us better in the current pedagogy and didactics here!” The idea to actually create a guide for this purpose was so plausible and appealing that now – about three years after that heartfelt groan – it has indeed led to the realization of the present workbook.

The handbook is designed for new teachers as well as experienced HLT instructors, including the government ministries and institutions that are responsible for them in the various immigration countries (consulates, local education authorities, etc.) The handbook offers them information in an easy to understand and practical fashion, covering three areas:

- Key aspects of the current pedagogy, didactics and methodology that are characteristic of the school landscape in the Western and Northern European immigration countries. The objective for better orientation in this regard is best served in chapters 3–8. They show, among others, the current extent of the consensus over the quality characteristics of teaching and the pedagogical positions, which models of teaching and learning are current, and what matters in the performance assessment and the furthering of linguistic competence. This information is also important in order to link one’s own teaching style with the prevalent one in the regular schools, in order to avoid a potential disruption for students who frequent HLT and regular classes.
- Chapters 9–12 deal specifically with the instructional aspects of HLT with its special situation. They deal with the choice of content, themes and materials for HLT, suggest models of educational planning, and offer possibilities of cooperation with regular classroom instruction.
- Informative background information for HLT and its goals, and the challenges facing the instructors of HLT, are found in chapters 1 and 2. Further aspects and problem areas – e. g. the question of professional development for HLT teachers or the various models of its integration into the regular school system – are dealt with in chapters 13–15, followed by the final chapter which offers sort of a vision for the future.

The chapters 1–15 are divided into three parts: Part A includes the background text, part B illustrates it with practical examples from HLT, experience reports, etc. Part C offers impulses for reflection, discussion and a deeper review of the chapter in question. Part A stands for factual actuality and quality, part B establishes the practical relevance for HLT, while the impulses in part C support a comprehensive examination of the content and facilitate the use of the handbook as a learning resource in training seminars and discussion groups. This kind of application is also furthered in that the handbook does not require a linear work structure. The individual chapters are not interdependent and may be read and applied without problems in any sequence of the readers’ choice.

To realize an advanced level book project, such as this, is unthinkable without the collaboration of experts, as attested by the fact that no less than 67 persons from five countries and 17 language groups have worked together on the handbook. For part A, there were 21 noted experts from Switzerland, Germany and Austria, for part B, 33 HLT instructors and 10 students from England, Sweden, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, as well as three other educators and officials of ministries. The texts were only minimally adapted editorially in order to preserve the original character and the authenticity of the material. This led to certain variations in the degree of specificity in part A, which however has in no way affected the book.

The recruitment, instruction and coordination of such a broad spectrum of teams and authors was unquestionably a daunting task. There is no question that the efforts associated with it were worthwhile, in that the handbook is now on very sound footing theoretically, affords a high degree of practicality and practical relevance, as well as an overview based on multiple perspectives and experiences from many countries and linguistic groups.