

# 2

## What kinds of challenges confront HLT instructors?

### 2A

#### Background text

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##### 1. Introduction

What kinds of challenges are faced by HLT instructors? The detailed answer to this question will vary from one host country to another, depending on the state of integration into the regular school system, as referenced in the statements in part 2 B. Unquestionably, there are common overarching issues. The following subheadings address nine points; some have been touched upon in chapter 1 A, others will be followed-up in other chapters. The objective is to shed light on the existing challenges and to support the teachers in solving the problems, as well as to sensitize them to possible excessive workload demands.

##### 2. Framework conditions, school structures

In most countries, federal states, cantons and communities, HLT has the status of an optional range of courses to the extent of two (and occasionally) four hours per week. It is organized and offered as described in detail in chapter 1 A.3, either by the educational institutions of the country of origin, the consulates, or by non-governmental sponsors (associations, foundations, etc.). As a rule, the employment conditions and compensation for HLT teachers vary considerably, depending on the sponsorship. A study in Switzerland (Calderon, Fibbi, Truong, 2013) demonstrates that the bandwidth of pay per lesson ranges from 0 to more than 100 Swiss francs. Depending on the nature of the sponsorship (and the number of students), HLT instructors teach full-time, part-time (as an additional occupation), or even on a voluntary basis.

In terms of the framework instruments, demands and expectations, HLT is subject to the legal provisions of the immigration country and the HLT curriculum of the country of origin. Moreover, it must orient itself according to different expectations (e.g. by the authorities as well as the colleagues) in the host country, or the parents of the students (see also chapter 1 A.2, goals of the HLT, and the statement in chapter 2 B.2). This may lead to conflicts of loyalty and other prob-

lems, such as when strongly-willed parents demand “more patriotism” which may conflict with the framework curriculum of the immigration country that places greater weight on education for tolerance and mutual understanding. It is important, therefore, that HLT teachers have a clear point of view that is compatible with the framework instrument of the host country, and that it is also well presented to the parents and colleagues.

HLT classes generally operate outside of the regular school timetable, poorly linked with the regular curriculum, distributed into various school locations and communities, and partly in unsuitable rooms or inadequately -equipped rooms. The first three of these framework conditions cannot be changed by a single HLT teacher. Aside from the direct dialog with the responsible authority in the communities and the schools, it is worthwhile to organize a professional association or a union and to seek better framework conditions from this higher platform.

The above referenced unfavorable framework conditions may lead to motivational problems for the students, as well as for the teaching staff. Aside from the talks and negotiations on various levels, a best practice measure for curing motivational problems is making the lessons exciting and interesting, an incentive for the students as well as the teachers.

**If we succeed to engage in at least an occasional cooperation with individual school buildings or teachers of regular curriculum classes, it supports not only the motivation, but also the linguistic and psycho-social development of the students.**

Numerous suggestions for this are offered in chapter 12, such as the “personal profile” sample, with which HLT teachers can present themselves in the school building. See also the very specific “Tips for HLT-newbies” by Valeria Bovina in chapter 1 B.5.

### 3. Preparation and support for the task as HLT instructor

HLT instructors realize very quickly that teaching HLT classes differs substantially from the regular classroom instruction for which they had been trained. Among the differences are multiclass teaching, a linguistically heterogeneous student body, the limitation to just a few lesson hours per week, students who are accustomed to open and individualizing instruction methods, partially missing or inadequate teaching materials, and an often weak integration into the regular school system, etc. (see chapter 1 A.6 and 2 B.1).

**As a rule, the new HLT teachers are often not prepared for these differences and specific conditions. Accordingly, they need orientation guides and support in terms of professional development and other information.**

A good example of this is the mandatory module “introduction to the Zurich school system” which is described in chapter 14 A.3. In addition to this first introduction to the local context, it is, however, very important that a new teacher become acquainted with the key points of the prevailing pedagogy and explore HLT-specific questions concerning lesson planning and the possibilities of cooperation with regular classroom instruction. To that end, various professional development courses are needed, both on the part of the immigration country, as well as the country of origin (as referenced in chapter 14). It is hoped not least that the present handbook (with help of innovative and pedagogically sound instructional methods and the discussions in section C of each chapter) can and will provide valuable input. Indispensable in any case, are good and intensive contacts with other HLT colleagues and with regular curriculum teachers, as well as with the authorities and the leadership of the school in the host country.

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### 4. Cultural mediation and dissemination as another facet in the professional mission

As a classroom teacher, one has a clear professional mission, be it in the country of origin or in the immigration country. The required competences for that charge are primarily acquired in teacher training. The educator who ventures abroad as an HLT teacher, will face additional new tasks for which s/he is not trained. Not least among them are the manifold mediation and dissemination functions between the parents and the teachers (or other entities) of the immigration country. HLT instructors with a good command of the local language will attest to it: instructors will

be asked very quickly to act as translators for meetings with parents. This can be especially meaningful in cases of students who are known to the regular classroom teachers as well as the HLT teachers. It stands to reason that these conversations involve more than a mere translation function. Therefore, it seems only proper that HLT teachers are compensated for their time and assistance with such functions.

When HLT instructors are called upon to translate in situations where they do not know the students involved, they fulfill mostly an additional function as cultural mediator and intercultural interpreter. Inasmuch as they are acquainted with the local school system and its expectations and also know the cultural background of the family as well as the culture-specific notions of school and education, they are able to build important bridges, fill information gaps, and offer support to the classroom teacher as well as the parents.

**Particularly important is the mediation and thematization of all the prevailing unwritten norms and expectations in the host country, which are often totally unknown, especially to emigrated parents from underprivileged educational backgrounds.**

This includes, for instance, unwritten rules that are taken for granted, concerning the “right” time when smaller and older children should go to bed, what they should eat for breakfast and eat in general, how to deal with homework and the learning environment at home, etc. To be informed about such issues and to be able to pass on the information is an important task for HLT instructors.

If HLT instructors are fully conversant about the local school system and the above mentioned “unwritten rules”, they can organize parents’ evenings (if at all possible in cooperation with the local school) and inform the parents about the values, attitudes, and expectations of the school in the host country. Finally, it is important to emphasize that the ability to speak two languages does not automatically qualify a person to work as an interpreter. In any case, it is imperative to not over-extend oneself with the demanding task of an intercultural interpreter, and to carefully consider the frequency of holding of such events.

## 5. Potentials and opportunities of HLT

Among the pleasant challenges of the work as an HLT instructor is the fact that one becomes aware of the potential, the importance and the opportunities of this kind of education. In the following, we are going to limit the focus to four facets.

### a) The importance of HLT for the development of biliteralism

HLT makes a decisive contribution in the development of biliteral competences (the ability to read and write in one's own first language). HLT offers more or less the only chance for learning the heritage language in its standard oral and written form and acquire a holistically integrated bilingualism, which includes the written culture. This applies particularly for students from educationally disadvantaged families who speak primarily dialect and rarely read and write.

Through the literacy training in HLT classes, the children and youths involved turn into competent language users in their first language. Thus, they retain and develop an important special expertise and an integral part of their bicultural identity. The HLT training counteracts the risks that students lose the connection with the written culture and become illiterate in their first language. Furthermore, most children and adolescents with a migration background command a sufficiently large vocabulary in their first language to master everyday familiar situations without problems. However, in a discussion involving more complex themes and demanding texts, their limitations are often quickly reached.

**The HLT fulfills among other things the important function of expanding the vocabulary of the first language and to render it functional for issues related to school and more demanding themes.**

This way, the problematic decline of the active vocabulary which is often observed, can be avoided: familiar and everyday vocabulary is actively available in the first language, school-related and more "academic" vocabulary, primarily in the language of the school and the local language is improved, respectively.

Both functions – the building of literal competences and a more comprehensive vocabulary in the first language – should be discussed with the students and their parents so as to raise their awareness of the significance of this endeavor.

### b) The contribution to a multilingual society

The HLT can make an important contribution to the implementation of two language-related postulates of the European Union. The first one pertains to the call for early acquisition of at least two foreign languages. The second one demands the furthering of individual multilingualism until all citizens have acquired at least a working knowledge of two languages in addition to their first language. (see European Union, 2005; bibliographic references). However, an indispensable precondition to this postulate is that the regular school system provide adequate framework conditions for HLT and that the parents be kept informed in an earnest and sustained manner.

### c) Potentials for the area of language awareness

Growing up bilingually is particularly productive if all languages are also furthered academically – that is, in terms of reading, writing, the mastery of the standard version of the language, and building of a broad vocabulary and linguistic awareness.

HLT can make a contribution in this area, which is all the more important, as the regular schools could not provide it. HLT could contribute much to the development of the important area of language awareness – inasmuch as the necessary learning opportunities and events are created.

**As the HLT students command at least two languages from the beginning (first language; the language of the host country and possibly other foreign languages offered in school), HLT should and can provide numerous opportunities for language comparison and language observation. These exciting and attractive learning events help the students as well to better connect their languages.**

Additionally, the positive effects of the work in the area of language awareness have been known and recognized for some time and are the reason why students in all of Europe have been keeping a language portfolio. From the broadly documented catalog of these effects by James&Garett (1992), here are a select few, which, of course, also apply to language comparisons and language observation in terms of HLT:

- generate curiosity for and interest in languages
- improve language competence and the ability to learn language
- further the interest in and the acceptance of linguistic diversity
- develop an awareness and a sense of pride about one's own multilingualism

- foster and reinforce the desire and motivation to learn and discover languages
- build an appreciation for other languages and cultures
- promote the skills of observation and analysis of language(s) and communication
- build metalinguistic abilities

#### d) Benefits for the HLT teacher

The work of an HLT instructor is not only challenging, but also enriching. The manifold experiences associated with pedagogical tasks and dealing with the culture of the immigration country offer a unique chance to further develop one's own transcultural competences as well as to integrate one's new or additional task as instructor with these enhanced competences.

## 6. A special challenge: one's own integration into the host country

Teachers who work for a contractually- determined period of time in the immigration country must integrate themselves for this time and simultaneously maintain their ability to return to the country of origin. This is demanding and can mean that dependents and family joining them may not be possible, that spouses may be separated or children may be separated from their parents. HLT instructors are not integrated into a team that meets daily, but operate rather at off-peak hours and float frequently from school to school. They carry a great deal of individual responsibility. They are in contact with many different relevant and responsible persons, must adapt to the prevailing structures and applicable regulations and norms in addition to fulfilling their mission. Upon successfully finding a suitable apartment, they must build in their school location and in their private social sphere a network of relationships and cultivate social contacts. A good knowledge of the local language, a tolerance for risk, inquisitiveness and stamina as well as sociability are optimal prerequisites to successfully master the encounters in the academic as well as the social sphere. If these aforementioned factors are not sufficiently considered, or conflict with economic incentives as primary reasons for assuming an HLT teaching assignment, the resulting consequence might well be isolation, psychological stress and illness.

It is recommended to find out as much as possible about the immigration country and the work conditions as an HLT instructor there, and to prepare oneself accordingly before assuming a work assignment. Most imperative is a good working knowledge of the language of the host country (level B1 according to the Common European Reference Framework is a prerequisite in many places), as well as a guaranteed housing situation.

## 7. Heterogeneity as a chance and challenge

A hallmark of many HLT class today is the great heterogeneity in terms of linguistic and migration-biographical and age-related circumstances, among others. The heterogeneous nature of HLT classes have been referenced already in chapter 1 A.5; the following serves to accentuate and develop three of the aforementioned points.

### a) Linguistic heterogeneity

HLT in its original form was a return-oriented form of instruction, designed to facilitate the re-integration of the student into the schools of the country of origin. At the time, the students who frequented these classes were the children of migrant workers whose presence in the immigration country was considered temporary. The family backgrounds as well as the language skills were rather homogeneous. This is definitely no longer the case today. Thus, children of the third migration generation, as well as those that arrived just a few months ago with their parents, attend the Italian or Croatian HLT classes together. In addition, there are children from mixed marriages (in which only one parent may speak the language taught in the HLT class), whose first language competences are correspondingly lower.

**The term "first language" itself is for many of these children and adolescents no longer unequivocal because they were reared with two languages since birth, or their competences in the local language and the language of the school are significantly higher than those of their heritage language.**

The fact that HLT students communicate with each other during the breaks or in informal chats not in the heritage language, but in the language of the school and the country, is therefore not unusual whatsoever.

## b) Age heterogeneity

HLT classes are almost always mixed, age-wise; in extreme cases, they include students from kindergarten up to the ninth grade. This is all the more challenging as, owing to the aforementioned reasons, there is no compelling relationship in terms of linguistic competence (a third grader who is eager to learn may under certain circumstances be much more competent in the first language than an eighth grader who speaks the heritage language mostly at home with her mother). Mixed -age classes may be an advantage because the children learn much from one another in groups of diverse ages. It can also become a problem, however, when the differences in terms of cognitive and social development are so big that it is almost impossible to find common themes and interests. This is where the didactic creativity of the HLT instructor plays a huge role. Mutual exchanges and easing the burden with sharing of preparation may become a real help; other suggestions for support are found in chapters 9–12 in this handbook.

## c) Family backgrounds

A further dimension of heterogeneity concerns the educational backgrounds and the living conditions of the family. Although they may come from the same country, there are often enormous differences in terms of the families' education and living conditions in the immigration country. This is due to the fact that economic and political conditions compel people from totally different social strata to emigrate. Such different socio-cultural backgrounds of the individual students may – together with the linguistic and age diversity – combine to a formidable challenge for the HLT instructors; on the other hand, they may give occasion to exciting and informative discussions.

**What all HLT students have in common are their bilingualism or multilingualism and in this context, double the resources and potential. For that reason, we recommend that all instructors who work with these students inform themselves thoroughly about the issue of bilingualism and multilingualism.**

It should be noted that bilingualism does not equate to perfect command or accent-free speaking ability of two languages. As a rule, the students have different levels of competence in their languages; this is normal and represents the starting point of their development. It is also of great importance to acknowledge the students' language performance and competencies – particularly also the competencies in their first language, which are too often overlooked and not appreciated by society and regular classroom instruction.

We highly recommend the work “The Psycholinguistics of Bilingualism” by Grosjean & Li (2013), which however is only available in English. It offers easy-to-understand foundations and assists HLT teachers with their own professional development and their consultations with parents and other persons who may be skeptical of HLT instruction and the concept of bilingualism.

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## 8. Teaching materials and homework

### a) Teaching materials

Among the challenges that confront many HLT instructors are the unsatisfactory situation concerning teaching resources and other, HLT-specific teaching materials (see chapters 1 A.6 and 2 B.2). Chapter 10 A.4 (“possible sources for teaching materials”) discusses the issue in detail (a series of concrete and practical suggestions for the procuring of materials are offered in chapter 10 A.5 and A.6).

At any rate, it is worthwhile to discuss with colleagues what kinds of materials they are using and which sources (electronic or otherwise) they consult. Many teachers have accumulated numerous self-made materials. Their exchange and the establishment of a (possibly electronic) archive may represent a meaningful and worthwhile support for many teachers.

### b) Homework

Homework is fundamentally a meaningful supplement for the HLT; especially since the number of lessons per week and school year are very limited. However, the amount of homework varies from country to country, and it is important to get acquainted with the applicable usage in the local school system. The students' remaining other obligations throughout the week and the available spare time are important aspects which have to be considered.

**If homework assignments present an excessive demand on students' time, the overload may be a reason for their not attending HLT classes. However, if homework assignments consist of a meaningful and feasible addition to the classroom instruction, they support the process of learning and, as such, are generally supported by the parents as well.**

Equally important as the quantity is the quality of homework: students will gladly forego a little spare time activity for an exciting, plausible and attractive assignment; however, for a boring compulsory task 20 minutes is already too much.

## 9. Assessment of the students' competences and performance

In dealing with a strongly heterogeneous student body, the partial individualizing of the goals, contents, and demands are important aspects of offering qualitatively good classroom teaching (see also chapter 3 about the characteristics of good classroom instruction). Connected with individualizing are questions and challenges concerning performance assessment. Chapter 7 ("supportive performance assessment") discusses key aspects of the issue; in Part 7 B there are practical examples, which lead to good suggestions. It must be noted that it is nearly impossible to come up with fair and reliable grades in light of the strongly heterogeneous student body, the short time available, and the varying competences of the students.

Dealing with the pressure emanating from different expectations (by parents and regular classroom teachers) concerning the grades in HLT classes can be demanding. The local instructors would like to see highly "realistic" grades that provide certain inferences about the students' competence in the first language, as well as their work behavior. The parents would like to see the best possible grades. Poor grades may lead to the students' foregoing the HLT classes, which is entirely possibly due to its optional character. A solution for this dilemma is not easy, and talks with parents and regular classroom instructors may have the best chance for a successful resolution. Time constraints, high pressure and workloads of HLT instructors may also be a problem. In such cases, it is advisable to reduce the communication to a few students with particularly conspicuous anomalies or who for other reasons (e. g. recent arrival) may require sustained joint support.

**The evaluation of HLT students has a high potential for teacher overload, which should not be underestimated.**

We recommend to treat this seriously and to discuss the issue with the local authorities as well. In an effort to further the students' performance, it is recommended in any case to give the students, aside from mere grades, differentiated, written or oral feedback and to strengthen their ability for self-evaluation with easy to understand, comprehensible criteria.

## 10. Classroom management and discipline: advice for dealing with student behavior

Aside from professional competencies, the school is also charged with the mediation of value orientations and social competences (this according to the dual charge of the school in terms of educational institution and nurturing institution). However, there are sometimes different country-specific expectations and priorities. Thus, the school system in one country may place a high priority on independence, whereas another country would consider diligence, obedience and punctuality as key competences. Yet a third country may place a key importance on democratic education (see also chapters 4 and 5, which deal with the core issues that are subject to consensus in most parts of Western and Northern Europe).

The referenced differences which may also exist from teacher to teacher have a great influence on classroom management and the enforcement of rules for the classroom. The students know the prevalent classroom management style in the host country and generally accept it as the norm or as normal. This kind of classroom management may, however, vary greatly from the one practiced by an individual HLT instructor. It is important to get acquainted with these differences and to establish one's own set of rules in accordance and conjunction with the students.

**It is not unusual to hear complaints from HLT instructors about alleged "discipline problems", only because the classroom management style and rituals differ from the established norm in the immigration country and because the students and teachers have different expectations of each other.**

We recommend that HLT instructors acquaint themselves through school visits and conversations with the local behavior patterns, role allocation (students and teachers) and classroom rituals. After that, they can establish their own classroom rules. These may concern the values, norms and rituals of the host country as well as the country of origin. If the rules – and the consequences of their violation – are discussed and established with the students, they are more readily accepted.

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