

4 “Show me where you study!” – An interactive project between German language students in Nottingham and St Andrews

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Abstract

Interactive projects among students of a Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) A1+/A2 level seem difficult to set up due to the limited language repertoire of the students. Thus, our aim was to take up the challenge and start a project with the objective of applying their language skills. We chose a collaborative approach to this project in order to offer students a shared learning experience.

Keywords: cross-university collaboration, CEFR A2 language courses, *VoiceThread*, university town, projects within the CEFR.

1. Introduction

Cross-university projects for language students at an elementary level can prove challenging due to the limited language repertoire, and they are, therefore, not very widespread. The project “Show me where you study!” seeks to take up this challenge and presents an innovative approach to enhance collaboration in German language teaching. Designed for students at the CEFR level A1+/A2, the project was run during the academic session 2014/15 at the University of Nottingham and the University of St Andrews.

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2. Setting

The project was carried out in two undergraduate student groups enrolled at the universities of Nottingham and St Andrews in March 2015. In Nottingham, the group consisted of Stage 2 language students of the Language Centre. In St Andrews, the students were in the second semester of the so-called “beginners’ course” at the German department. Both courses were at an A2 level.

The topics that had been covered before the project started included tourism, holiday and leisure. Within these topics, and by using an action-oriented approach, students had previously learnt to:

- plan a holiday;
- engage in a conversation talking about holidays and holiday destinations;
- make enquiries;
- read information in travel guide books.

Taking this context as a starting point, the idea arose to run a project in which students created their own travel guide book about their university town. The title was “Show me where you study” and involved student exchanges via the digital tool *VoiceThread*.

Students were required to work in groups and research various aspects (see below). In order to add a ludic aspect to the project, students had to guess the other town and thus, were not allowed to mention the name of their own university.

The topic areas were local food, university and university life, leisure time and night life, as well as surrounding areas.

3. General objectives

Among our objectives was the enhancement of collaborative and cooperative learning in CEFR A2 German language courses. Collaboration and cooperation are often used interchangeably as the concepts feature the same criteria: symmetry, common goals, and division of labour among group members (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 8). However, Dillenbourg (1999) argues: “[i]n cooperation, partners split the work, solve sub-tasks individually and then assemble the partial results into the final output. In collaboration, partners do the work ‘together’” (p. 8). This means there is only a minimal division of labour.

We are aware that our project contains both collaborative and cooperative aspects. On the one hand, the project has a tangible end product which is an indicator for collaboration, while the contributions of each group remain very much visible, which suggests cooperative learning.

In addition, it was important for us to move beyond common group work and provide students with more than a mere exchange of facts and recommendations, which meant moving beyond a simple “hook-up” and “exchange of information”, and to attempt to foster team work in a learning project (Dooly, 2008, p. 66). More precisely, Dooly (2008) recommends that “students’ interaction must be linked to the others in such a way that the success of the planned activity can be achieved only by everyone contributing their part” (p. 72).

In particular, the project focuses on reflecting the use of language in a “real-life” situations and offers the opportunity to apply previously acquired language skills and knowledge. Hence, the approach was action-orientated. By creating something themselves at the end of a learning unit, it was our aim to raise students’ awareness of how much they had achieved and what they are able to create at this language level.

For the wider course curriculum, we wanted to create multiple benefits such as fostering team-work skills, researching a topic and working with a new digital tool.

4. Language specific objectives

In addition to the general objectives, it was fundamental that the focus remained on the use of language. Thus, by analysing the material we had worked with, we identified the following categories the students were required to include (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Language specific objectives

Vocabulary	Grammar	Structures	Style	Functions
holiday tourism	adjective endings	relative clauses (St Andrews)	guide book	addressing people
leisure time activities	reflexive verbs	subordinate clauses	positive describing	commenting and guessing
	comparative superlative			asking questions

This table, for the most part, reflects the language descriptors of the CEFR ([Council of Europe, 2001](#)) and *Profile Deutsch* at A2 level which are a good reference for setting learning outcomes.

5. Project stages

The project consisted of five stages which will be described in the following.

5.1. Introduction to the project and the e-tool *VoiceThread*

In class, we introduced the project to our students and explained the use of the e-tool *VoiceThread*. Students also chose their topic areas and received instructions about the language requirements and the design of the tourist guide.

5.2. Topic research and writing in groups

In groups, students researched their topics and wrote their contribution in a Word-document, where they also included pictures. The text length was around 250 words. This stage was carried out in a different way in St Andrews and in Nottingham: Nottingham used more class-time whereas students in St Andrews had to research and write as part of their homework.

5.3. Text and picture upload

The initial idea was for students to upload their own contributions on *VoiceThread*. However, due to time constraints and for practical reasons, students sent their projects via e-mail to the teachers, who uploaded it and made it accessible to the other group.

5.4. Read contributions and comment

After receiving the other group's guide book, students had to read through it and make one written and one audio comment on *VoiceThread*. For instance, they could ask questions, comment on the pictures and/or text (e.g. "This looks nice."/ "What is the weather like?"/ "This club looks better than the ones here.") and try to guess the place.

5.5. Response to the comments received

In the last stage of the project, students were asked to refer back to the comments and questions received. These final comments presented the official end of the project.

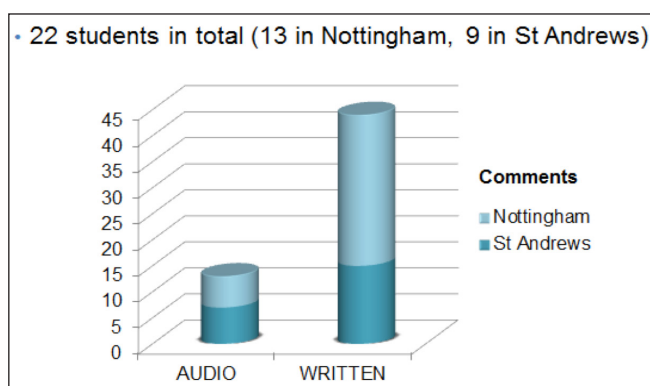
In this context, it is also important to mention the preparatory work that had to be carried out by the teachers before starting the project. In order to ensure that the project ran smoothly, good communication and collaboration was indispensable. By using *Dropbox*, e-mail and *Skype*, ideas were exchanged, project outlines drafted, learning aims set and a time plan created. Furthermore,

the use of *VoiceThread* was discussed and prepared (i.e. signing up students, testing different functions).

6. Results and further discussion

A graphic analysis of the project on the comment frequency is presented in [Figure 1](#). With a total number of 22 students (13 in Nottingham and 9 in St Andrews), the groups were well balanced. The results clearly indicate a strong preference for written comments ($n=44$) in comparison to audio comments ($n=13$). This thought-provoking result was not what had been expected, as we assumed the out-of-class use would encourage students to make more audio comments.

Figure 1. Students' comment frequency



The feedback for the project was very positive and demonstrated that students liked working in teams and enjoyed applying their language skills. However, for future projects of this kind there are a few aspects to consider that we would like to discuss in this section.

One interesting outcome was that students posted much fewer audio comments than written ones (see [Figure 1](#)). Thus, speaking might not necessarily be

facilitated by placing it outside of the language classroom. The audio comment function on *VoiceThread* makes it possible for students to record themselves several times, listen to their audio file and make it accessible to others whenever they decide. This is clearly one of the positive aspects as it enables learners to listen to their own pronunciation and work on it. However, the fact of publishing an audio comment so that it can be heard by others (again and again – on the contrary to classroom contributions) does not put all students at ease.

Whatever digital tool is used for such a project (a free alternative is *Dropbox*), it is fundamental to be aware of the limitations it might have. For some tools, licenses are required, while others are freely accessible, but might be problematic in terms of data protection. It is essential to keep in mind that students need to have access to the technical facilities in order to use the tool and participate in the project.

The question remains open as to how the project could be assessed. As [MacKinnon \(2013\)](#) points out in her Higher Education Academy report, “using e-tools to facilitate international collaborations and enhance language teaching” could lead to a “lack of assessment or reward for engagement” which then “can significantly reduce participation as students are very strategic in the use of their time” (p. 22). Although we did not assess the project and did not give any reward, students were informed about learning outcomes and the benefits of participating in the project. In this project, producing a small guide-book and seeing the result might be a reward in itself.

A similar challenge was how to deal with mistakes as students’ contributions were done in team-work and shared within the groups. In this case, we used some descriptors of the CEFR as a reference and focused on the communicative ability rather than on correcting every mistake. Especially when work is published and shared with other groups, teachers might feel the need to correct everything.

However, we refrained from this in order to encourage students to participate more. Only mistakes made in their presentations were pointed out if they were regarded as very important.

To summarise, we would like to repeat a similar project as the advantages prevailed. However, aspects like assessment, rewards and how to deal with mistakes still need more reflection to ensure that students are motivated, enjoy participating and at the same time apply and improve their language skills.

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