4 Language education as public engagement: designing authentic projects on German-speaking film

Thomas Jochum-Critchley[1]

Abstract

This chapter argues for the integration of public engagement into language teaching in order to respond to the current challenging environment for language study. *Impact teaching* seeks to develop language education through engagement with audiences beyond the classroom and especially outside higher education. One illustration of this approach is the student projects which have been designed as part of the module 'Contemporary German-speaking film', first introduced at the University of York in 2018/2019. The project brief asks students to organise, prepare, and deliver a film evening event including a film introduction and a post-screening Q&A in German. The approach has proven very successful with very positive student feedback on the initial in-person format, despite the limited audience numbers. The move to an online format during the pandemic has increased the impact of the event dramatically and the newly collected attendee feedback has confirmed very positive responses to the projects.

Keywords: project-based language learning, public engagement, German, film education.

1. University of York, York, United Kingdom; thomas.jochum-critchley@york.ac.uk; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4703-8546

1.   Introduction

Language education in the current UK context, and more specifically language studies as an academic field, finds itself in a very challenging position. A decline in the uptake of languages in secondary education (Collen, 2020) as well as a declining number of students in higher education language programmes – despite some positive trends in institution-wide language programmes (Critchley, Illingworth, & Wright, 2021, p. 7) – seem to suggest that the value and relevance of language skills in the UK are diminishing.

Integrating public engagement into the curriculum in languages is therefore not simply a matter of pedagogic innovation: it provides a motivating and stimulating environment for the development of students' language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and a range of experiences and skills, such as digital literacy, collaboration, problem solving, etc. It also sends a political message about the value and relevance of language learning and multilingualism in a society where a monolingual ideology prevails (Blackledge, 2000, p. 26) by rendering the work of language learners as language users and their cultural expertise more visible to the wider community.

2.   Impact teaching: integrating public engagement into the language curriculum

2.1.   Background and inspiration

Impact teaching takes its cue on the one hand from the growing field of research impact which can be defined as knowledge and innovation generated by research activities and contributing to, benefiting, and influencing society (University of York, n.d.).

On the other hand, it relates to pedagogical approaches with high impact which usually involve experiential learning as well as public engagement and/or performance (Kuh, O'Donnell, & Reed, 2013).

Impact teaching also builds on the notion of the student as producer (Neary, Saunder, Hagyard, & Derricott, 2015) which promotes a vision of and strategy for learning and teaching in higher education which re-evaluates the role of student work. Learning is not merely preparation for an assessment, but the production of genuine knowledge which contributes to the output of higher education. Rather than an 'expert in waiting', whose knowledge is partial and not fully developed, the student is seen as an expert in their own right. Insofar as student work involves the performance of tasks for authentic audiences beyond a teacher or peers, it is assessed through authentic assessment tasks (Zilvinskis, 2015).

A similar re-orientation of the perspective on the learner can be observed in languages. The language learner is less seen as having an incomplete or deficient knowledge of the language of study, in opposition to an idealised 'native speaker' of an imaginary target language, but as a learner who builds on their existing knowledge to develop a repertoire of linguistic and communicative resources whilst becoming a multilingual subject (Kramsch & Gerhards, 2012, p. 75).

The language learner is viewed first and foremost as a competent language user who needs opportunities for authentic communications and interactions with other language users and multilinguals. Thus, *impact teaching* in languages puts "authentic learning" (Zwahlen, 2017, p. 37) at its heart and builds on examples of language and culture activities that are often organised as extra-curricular activities, such as creating a theatre play, organising film screenings, or curating an exhibition (Jochum-Critchley, 2018).

2.2. Project design – pre-pandemic

The student projects are part of the module 'Contemporary German-speaking film', an optional second- and final-year module introduced in 2018/2019 at the University of York. This 20-credit year-long module is taught through two weekly seminars of one hour with four compulsory film screenings. As part of the summative assessment (40% of the module mark), students had to complete a group project which runs for about six to seven weeks in the spring term.

The project brief consists of organising a film screening of a German-speaking film from one of the directors studied in the first part of the module. The event has to be organised as a public event open to a non-academic German-speaking audience. The project brief further specifies a number of specific elements that were required from the students:

- a film introduction in German preceding the screening;

- a post-screening discussion or Q&A session with the audience in German;

- the creation of a poster for the event; and

- a small programme leaflet with four pages of A5 to be distributed to the audience at the event.

During the group work phase, seminar sessions are used to introduce the project brief, raise awareness of essential aspects of event organisation, marketing, and identifying potential target audiences, as well as to facilitate group work and collaboration. Using authentic examples, students work on analysing and understanding the content and structure of relevant text types such as film posters, event brochures, programme leaflets, and film introductions so as to develop students' understanding of how best to engage with an audience that is not part of the academic setting. Students are also required to give regular updates on the progress of the project and they have an opportunity to practise the film introduction one week ahead of the event.

2.3.   Project adjustments during the pandemic

In 2020/2021, the move to online teaching and learning required a change of some of the core elements of the project brief. The film event was changed to an online event and all related documents had to be produced in an online form, especially the programme leaflet. Students were free to choose a suitable platform, with GoogleSites being suggested as the university provides technical

and pedagogic support for this tool. The online event was set up as a Zoom meeting by the tutor in line with the support given for in-person events. As an additional support structure for online group work, a collaborative online group log was created where students could log their individual contributions as well as document the outcomes of group meetings. This ensured greater transparency of contributions and an additional resource for monitoring project progress in the absence of in-person seminars or group meetings.

## 3. Project outcomes

3.1. Project completion

Since first running in the academic year 2018/2019, four film events have been organised by students who worked together in groups of four for each of the events. Group membership was decided by me as tutor with the aim of forming groups that were as balanced and fair as possible with regards to language level, gender, and engagement with the module.

All four project teams completed all aspects of the project brief and the quality of the student work was of a high to very high standard (see Figure 1). The marks awarded especially for the quality of language used in the spoken and written elements were in the first or high 2.1 category and for all but one student higher than their language mark in the core language module.

Overall, students seemed to have embraced the projects and the collaborative process with great enthusiasm. The events and the documents showed that all members of the project groups were actively involved in the event organisation. Although no specific requirement was given as to how the groups distributed the tasks, the groups allocated the main spoken part to final-year or more advanced second-year students. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that all group members contributed to the interactive part of the film events. Students showed great creativity in promoting the event: they used a range of methods including social media and email, in addition to using the event poster as a marketing tool. In

pre-pandemic times, students also decided to offer drinks and snacks to make the event more appealing. This confirmed that project-based learning is a good way of integrating creativity and allowing initiative to develop among students.

Figure 1.   Film poster created by students in 2018/2019. © Alex Male[2]
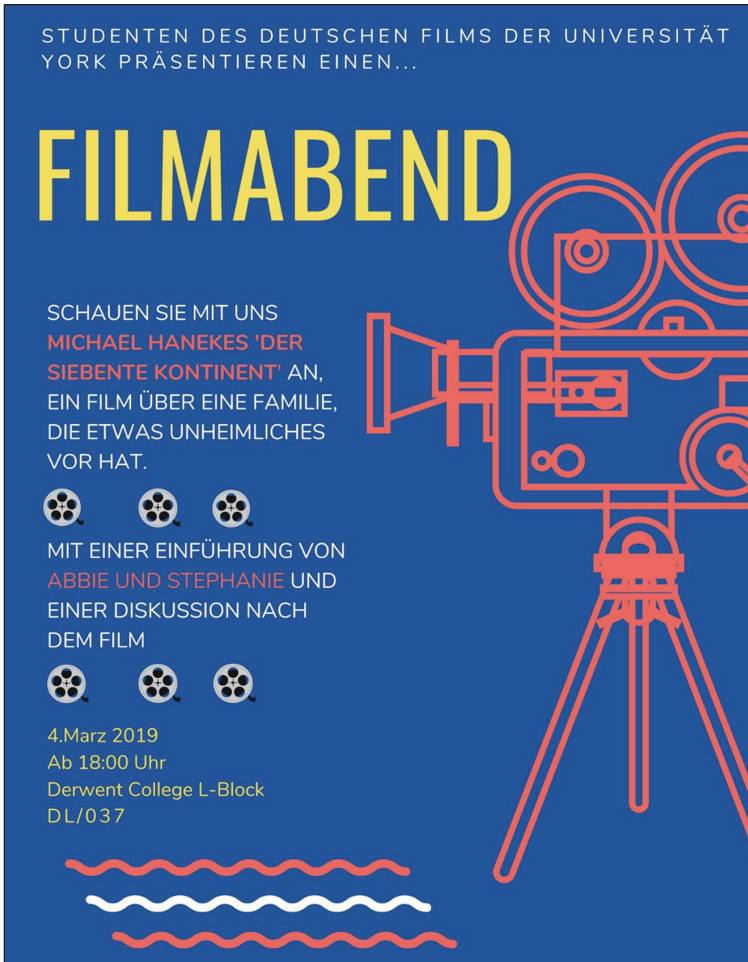
3.2.   Pre-pandemic outcomes – student feedback

In the first two years, the film evenings were organised on campus and approximately 15 people attended each of the three events.

After completion of the 2018/2019 projects, a questionnaire was distributed to understand the students' perception of the project work. The questionnaire comprised ten questions covering various aspects of the project such as overall benefits of and experience with the project, its collaborative nature, the skills developed, the experience of speaking German in front of a real audience, and the assessment of group work as well as the preparation for the film evening. Students also rated the project on a five-point Likert scale from excellent to very poor; 62.5% of students responded (five out of eight) and all students gave the project an overall rating of good (60%) or very good (40%).

Students commented on a very wide range of aspects and their responses showed a wide range of different perceptions. It is, however, possible to identify a few individual items that seem to support the reading that this approach did work in the intended way. Speaking in front of a real audience was perceived as giving students a sense of achievement, and at the same time it was seen as stressful and making them aware of gaps in their language skills.

Despite the stress involved, students acknowledged the positive emotional impact of the project work as some selected to describe the experience with the project as fun; they also found it entertaining to work with others and exciting to do something outside the classroom. Students also said that they developed their written and spoken German skills.

As all students also stated that they were well or very well prepared for the project, the stress was manageable and ultimately contributed to a positive and satisfying experience. One student who had participated in their second year, told me two years later at the farewell get-together with finalists that they still had the film poster on their room wall, which is a striking statement about the impact the project had on this student.

As for the impact of the event and its reach to a wider audience, it became clear after the first two years that organising this event on campus would attract only a small non-academic audience (if, indeed, it attracted one at all). Although the events had clearly reached out to students outside the department, including regular or visiting students who were native German speakers, and whose lively engagement in the post-screening discussions in German made an important contribution, the impact on a non-academic audience was very limited. Altogether only one attendee was a member of the general public, and they were enrolled in a *Languages for All* German evening class.

3.3.   The online project

In 2020, the adjustment to the online format of the event led to a stronger emphasis on digital skills in preparing and running it. The basic structure of the preparation was maintained with the main difference being all seminars and group meetings being held online. However, one additional tool was used successfully to facilitate group work and collaboration. A shared Google Docs was used to create a group work log where students added their individual contributions and logged their notes about group meetings and decisions made. This document has proven very effective in monitoring students' progress, but also helped students to keep track of each other's contributions.

The film programme was created as a website which was shared with all attendees ahead of the film screening (see Figure 2). Students used Google Sites to create a well organised and informative programme in German. The promotion of the online event relied essentially on the same tools used in previous years, such as social media postings, emailing of relevant audiences such as student societies, university newsletters, and local schools, but the online nature of the event allowed organisers to invite contacts from further afield, such as students from the University of Münster in Germany with whom the departmental German student society had been collaborating previously.

The event itself was organised as a Zoom meeting and thus required more detailed planning compared to the in-person situation. To make the event

secure and free from disruptions and unexpected intrusions, students created a registration form in English and German and a link to the Zoom meeting with an enabled waiting room was distributed to all registered attendees. Specific roles such as monitoring the chat and leading the discussion were also distributed amongst the group members.

Figure 2. Online film programme created in 2020/2021. © Keely Blanchard[3]

The attendance at the event took everybody by surprise. Approximately 100 people logged on and about 70 attendees participated in most of the event, as documented by the user statistics provided by Zoom. This included German native speakers, some of whom resided in Germany, students of German from the university and from local schools, a range of academics from the department and elsewhere in the university, as well as local German teachers and other German speakers. The post-screening discussion in German was very lively and engaging and lasted approximately 30 minutes. German native speakers as well as non-native speakers participated alike. In addition to comments or questions on aspects of the film, a German attendee also contributed personal experiences to the discussion.

---

3. Reproduced with kind permissions from the copyright holder.

The online nature of the event enabled an authentic inter- or transcultural encounter between German learners and German speakers located not only in the UK but also in Germany (and potentially elsewhere).

The audience feedback collected via a short online questionnaire was completed by 46 people, of whom 43 claimed to have attended the event. With just above 95% of attendees rating the event as very good (60.5%) or good (34.9%) and only one attendee each rating it satisfactory or unsatisfactory, the event was a resounding success. Open comments were also overwhelmingly positive.

> "Thank you for putting on this event. As it was online it meant that I could attend although I don't live in York. Very well done to the students: they were very professional and delivered an amazing thought-provoking evening! Very well done!".

The positive impact of the event could also be seen in the large number of attendees expressing an interest in being informed of similar events in the future.

4. Conclusion

The experience with linking language and culture teaching and learning to public engagement via student-led film screenings supports the claim that real-life tasks with authentic interactions in the language of study have a positive outcome for language proficiency and skills learning (Ozverir, Osam, & Herrington, 2017, p. 272) as well as the overall student experience. The pivot to the online format in 2020 has increased noticeably the attendance and impact of the student-led event, which makes a strong case for continuing with the online format for the foreseeable future.

In initiating and stimulating discussion and exchange on a German-speaking film, students have shown that they can contribute in a meaningful way to both the cultural life of society and the promotion of languages in the UK.

References

Blackledge, A. (2000). Monolingual ideologies in multilingual states: language, hegemony, and social justice in Western liberal democracies. *Sociolinguistic Studies, Estudios de Sociolingüística, 1*(2), 25-45. https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v1i2.25

Collen, I. (2020). *Language learning is still in decline in England's schools.* https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/language-learning-decline-england-schools

Critchley, M., Illingworth, J., & Wright, V. (2021). *Survey of language provision in UK universities in 2021. Report no. 3, July.* https://university-council-modern-languages.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/UCML-AULC-Survey-2021-Report.pdf

Jochum-Critchley, T. (2018, June 1). *Rethinking the curricular and extra-curricular divide* [Slides]. https://prezi.com/uf-pe3xmuhrd/?token=422d89c1b58f364c16cdf21118834fc1c4666068f6d099a1d5b2bedefb080df3

Kramsch, C., & Gerhards, S. (2012). Im Gespräch: an interview with Claire Kramsch on the "multilingual subject". *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German, 45*(1), 74-82. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-1221.2012.00120.x

Kuh, G., O'Donnell, K., & Reed, S. (2013). *Ensuring quality & taking high-impact practices to scale.* Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Neary, M., Saunder, G., Hagyard A., & Derricott, D. (2015). *Student as producer: research engaged teaching: an institutional strategy.* Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/projects/lincoln_ntfs_2010_project_final_report_fv.pdf

Ozverir, I., Osam, U. V., & Herrington, J. (2017). Investigating the effects of authentic activities on foreign language learning: a design-based research approach. *Educational Technology & Society*, *20*(4)*,* 261-274.

University of York. (n.d.). *What is research impact?* https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/research/research-impact/impact-definition/

Zilvinskis, J. (2015). Authentic assessment: using authentic assessment to reinforce student learning in high-impact practices. *Assessment Update, 27*(6), 7-13. https://doi.org/10.1002/au.30040

Zwahlen, C. P. (2017). Authentic learning: boosting ELL language and academic proficiency development. *The International Schools Journal, 36*(2), 37-43.

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.