

Supporting Task-Based Learning through Cultural Web Activities in the First Year German Curriculum

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Introduction

The use of technology is much more prevalent in today's language classrooms than only a decade ago, ranging from interactive power point presentations to podcasts. Many language instructors also employ the latest tools of computer-mediated communication such as blogs, wikis, and video- or text-based chat to increase language learning opportunities for their students. These recent technological tools speak to the learning preferences of today's students by giving them an opportunity to work collaboratively, address a larger audience, and build an online community. Other learner characteristics of today's digital generation that have been identified by researchers (Dede 2005; Oblinger 2003; Prensky 2001) include favoring graphics over text, a preference for learning by doing, and the desire for flexibility and customization.

While above mentioned tools of computer-mediated communication are increasingly successfully integrated in language learning, it seems that the Internet with its wealth of cultural information is not used to its full potential. It is often still utilized as a mere storage area to post rather traditional fill-in-the-blanks grammar and vocabulary exercises instead of making use of its cultural content to foster meaningful linguistic as well as cultural learning. This article presents a series of cultural web-based activities that were created for and integrated in the second semester German classes at the University

of Alberta. Each activity presents a specific task that is accomplished through an Internet information search followed by a pair-or group role play in which the collected information is utilized. The tasks are designed to deepen students' cultural knowledge while simultaneously practicing the language structures that are the focus of the current chapter.

Task-based language learning aims to develop the learner's ability to use language in real communication. In the fields of second language acquisition and language pedagogy, there is no complete agreement of what constitutes a "task". One of the first definitions of communicative task was offered by Nunan (1989): "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10). More recent definitions (Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001; Ellis 2003; Lee 2000; Skehan 1996) concur with the early description quoted above on the most important features of a task: a primary focus on meaning, a connection to the real world, and the requirement of learners to use the language to accomplish the task.

The tasks that we designed for our second semester German classes are intended to closely resemble situations in the real world and to elicit a broad range of language structures, thus giving our learners the opportunity to practice real-live communication and to learn to function interactionally in the target language. By designing web-based activities followed by role plays, meaningful tasks were created that encourage learners to expand on the topic, ask questions, and elaborate as they see fit while making use of the cultural knowledge that they had gained. All tasks are done in pair- or group-work which encourages scaffolding and advancing of the Zone of Proximal Development

(Vygotsky 1978), and offers opportunities for negotiated interactions. At the same time, using the Internet in such a way also caters to our learner's preferences for experimental learning, offers choices, and makes use of a multimedia environment (Kost 1999).

The following web-based activities have been designed to accompany the cultural content presented in the textbook *Kontakte*. However, since most beginning German textbooks cover the same topics, all web activities can easily be used in classes working with a different textbook. Furthermore, they can also be adapted from German into any other language, as the themes that are discussed are common to every language.

All described activities follow a similar pattern when integrated into a lesson plan: after a review of the vocabulary and language structures required for the specific topic, a pre-activity (e.g., brainstorming, game, class discussion) leads into the topic and activates students' background knowledge on the topic. The instructor goes through each activity with the class, explaining and modeling the task so that students know exactly what to do. Students then engage in the information search part of the activity which leads to the role play in which they have to use the information they found on the web. At the end of the lesson, students perform their role plays in front of the class or, as we have done last year, use computer-mediated communication (i.e. chat) to perform the role play.

Shopping

Typically, the second semester of German begins shortly after Christmas and this overlaps nicely with the concept of buying and giving gifts. The web activity "Einkaufen bei Walmart" was designed with the objective that students would pretend to buy gifts online and then develop a role play in which they describe each gift and for whom they

have purchased it. As a pre-activity in the classroom, it would be beneficial to teach a wide variety of vocabulary items related to gifts or presents. Another aspect that can be discussed is what kind of gifts students received or gave over the holiday season. Given that this activity also requires students to use the dative and the accusative cases, it is essential to teach and practice these structures in class leading up to this web activity.

After a short warm-up (review of vocabulary) in the lab, instructors should read through the activity with their students and provide them with an appropriate model so that students know exactly what to do. In this activity, students are to imagine that they are visiting their grandparents in Germany over the winter holidays and that they did not bring any gifts with them. In order to instill some sense of urgency and to make shopping via the Internet more plausible, the activity presents a tight timeline: It is already Friday afternoon and Christmas is on Monday. While this might not seem problematic in North America, it creates a great opportunity to discuss the cultural differences in opening and closing times of stores in Europe and specifically Germany. Once this cultural topic has been discussed, students can proceed with the activity. It is useful to ask students to make two lists: one with people they want to buy presents for, and one with possible gifts.

Students then engage in the information search, using the Walmart website. Following the web search, students (in pairs) prepare a role play: They pretend that it is now Christmas and they are talking to their cousin in Switzerland who is curious about the presents that they bought for everyone. They discuss prices, color, and usefulness. Students have 10-15 minutes to prepare their role plays and then perform their skits in front of the class. As a follow-up to this web activity (and if time permits), the class can listen to the song “Was soll ich ihr schenken?” by the band “Die Prinzen”. It discusses

the dilemma a man has of finding the perfect gift for a special woman in his life. The song is very humorous, easy to understand, and again practices all the elements that have been focused on in the web activity.

Living in Germany

Housing and living in German speaking countries are topics common to every beginning textbook. Vocabulary includes rooms in the house and articles of furniture, as well as the different types of living spaces. Since this topic offers a lot of cultural information, two separate web activities were developed. The first focuses on finding the perfect vacation home in Northern Germany and the second activity focuses on finding an apartment or shared living accommodation in Germany.

For the first web activity “Wohnen in Deutschland”, we developed a powerpoint presentation to illustrate the differences and similarities between homes in Germany and Canada, to emphasize the cultural information given in the textbook, and to pre-teach some relevant vocabulary. Following the powerpoint and class discussion regarding the living situation in Germany, students are given an opportunity to discover more about homes in Germany as well as practice the previously learned vocabulary related to items in a home. Students imagine that they have holidays while studying in Germany, and that they want to go to the North Sea with some friends. They have the choice between two different vacation homes and need to conduct some final research on each of the properties. It is best to pair up students before the web search begins; in order to save time one student could research Home A and the other Home B. Students fill out a worksheet with details on the two vacation homes (ca. 10-15 minutes). They are then

asked to develop a role play discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each vacation home, keeping in mind what is important to them and their friends. By the end of the role play each pair makes a decision as to which home they will reserve.

The second web activity “Auf Wohnungssuche” that was designed for this chapter practices a very useful situation: Finding an apartment or shared living in Germany can be a daunting task for exchange students and it is important to make them aware of the cultural differences as well as practice the important vocabulary related to this topic. As a pre-activity, the class could brainstorm about how students found their own living arrangements, how much space they have, how much they pay for rent and utilities, etc. The video accompanying the textbook *Kontakte* provides a clip discussing the shortage of housing in Munich which could easily be used as a follow-up to your own class discussion. If this video is not available, ample information can be found on the web about the shortage of housing in Munich.

Following the discussion, the students then begin a web search in which they will actually find an apartment in Germany. This is a great opportunity for students who already know that they will be traveling to or studying in Germany in the future. Each student visits the website “Studenten-WG”, and chooses a city in Germany. Once they have decided which city they would like to live in, they need to pick an advertisement and find out specific information, such as location, size, price of the apartment, and how many people share the place.

Following the web search, students then have the opportunity to design their own advertisement for the same apartment. This is the type of advertisement that one would find on a bulletin board in a university. It is a good idea to bring a few art supplies for the

students such as paper and markers. Once the advertisements have been made, half the students hang their advertisement on the board and the other half picks an advertisement that is suitable to them. This is also a different way to pair up students. Each pair then sits together and develops a role play based on the ad. The student who designed the ad and hung it up will now be the person who is looking for a roommate and the partner who picked the ad will be the student looking for a place to live. The skills practiced in this task are useful and relevant since a number of our language students might study at a German-speaking university. They have the chance to practice asking and answering questions, and they also need to be able to “sell” their products: the apartment and themselves as a roommate. This task allows students to be very creative and at the same time practice important vocabulary and prepare for a real-world situation.

Trip to Hamburg

Another realistic task is the web activity “Reise nach Hamburg”. Since many of our students learn a new language for the purpose of traveling to the target language country, practicing how to find one’s way around with maps and means of public transportation is relevant to their own lives. Depending on where in North America our students are learning German, there can be some major differences when we think about traveling around a big city. Some students may have never taken the train, subway or the bus even in their own city. Hence, it is important that we expose our students to the different modes of transportation in Germany as well as teach them how to ask for directions or help.

The objective of the following web activity is to have students review the different means of transportation (U-Bahn, S-Bahn, Bus) and be able to plan a day trip in one big city in Germany using different forms of public transportation. The class could start with a review of the vocabulary and a brainstorming activity on which modes of transportation students have already used in their home city or on trips. As a second step and a visual introduction to Hamburg, a short video from the Hamburg webpage could be shown. The instructor can take this opportunity to discuss some interesting places in Hamburg and a little of the city's history.

Following these pre-activities, students are introduced to the task: they imagine they are in Germany for the summer holidays and they have landed in Hamburg where they are to meet up with some friends. Unfortunately, the friends have to work on that day which leaves our students to explore Hamburg on their own using public transportation. Students (in pairs) begin by searching a map that has most of the major tourist attractions on it and they will need to decide upon three that they would like to visit. Once they have agreed on these three locations in Hamburg, they need to use a map of Hamburg and plot out where each of these attractions is located. Following this web search, students visit the public transportation system website of Hamburg and find out information about the different prices of tickets and modes of transportation. All of this information should be written down as it will be used in the role play to follow.

Once the information search has been completed, the pairs need to decide who will be the tourist and who will be working for the train station to provide information to the tourist. During the role play, students should discuss the price of tickets and how the tourist can best get to each of the attractions that he/she wants to see. Information such as

prices, bus numbers or U-Bahn/S-Bahn lines need to be asked for and provided. This task is comprised of several small elements in order not to overwhelm students with the entire situation, but rather to guide them through it step by step. The activity can easily be adapted to any other location as most cities have excellent web sites listing their major tourist attractions, maps, and means of transportation.

At the Restaurant

A universal topic that occurs in all beginning language textbooks is food and ordering food in a restaurant. The objective of the following web activity is to review previously learned restaurant vocabulary, to become aware of the cultural differences between eating in a Canadian and a German restaurant, and practicing to order in a German restaurant. As a pre-activity, the class works through a brief cultural reading from the textbook which aids students in comparing and contrasting their own cultural habits in relation to restaurants with that of the German-speaking world. Students then listen to a dialogue from the chapter that models a conversation in a restaurant, dealing with finding a table and ordering food.

Next, students engage in the web search: they have to imagine they are going to a restaurant with some friends. They follow a link to a menu, and decide which food they would like to eat. For the ensuing role play, one student plays the customer and one student plays the waiter/waitress (this activity also lends itself easily to be done in groups of three: two customers, one waiter/waitress). They have to ask for the menu, order food and beverages, complain about something that is wrong with the food, ask for the bill, pay and leave a tip. This task is very useful for students if they want to travel to or live in

Germany. It also allows them to be creative and practice all the vocabulary related to food as well as functions such as complaints.

Conclusion

In the winter term 2007, we included these cultural web activities for the first time in our second semester German classes, and students reacted overwhelmingly positive to them. A short questionnaire at the end of the semester showed that 86% of these students thought that the cultural activities and role plays in the lab were a good addition to the course, and 90% declared that the activities helped them improve their cultural knowledge and awareness of topics in German-speaking countries.

Using the cultural information available on the Internet combined with communicative activities allowed students to work together, accomplish real-world tasks by interacting meaningfully in the target language and practicing the language structures and vocabulary items that they learned in class. Both students and instructors agreed that using the computer lab in such a way not only constituted a nice break from the regular class, but that it helped improve students' language skills as well as increased their exposure to cultural issues in the German-speaking world.

We would like to invite you to try out our activities in your German classes. Please email the authors for any questions, comments or suggestions. Complete lesson plans are also available upon request. Our web activities are accessible at:

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~germweb/>

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