Go native!: Using collaborative learning in the foreign language classroom

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Background

• Language Centre, service department within the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies

• Some 1200 students per semester from 30+ departments

• ~ 90 students of German from A2 to B2/C1 level 2017/19

• ~ 30 German and Austrian exchange students
Rationale

• Few perceived opportunities for contact with German native speakers, language and target cultures outside the classroom (no year abroad)

• More speaking practice and interaction in class with a native speaker

• Foster intercultural exchange

• Providing foreign students with an insight into language teaching of their native language (more awareness)
Contextualisation

• Advance HE in the UK: 21st century skills:
  Literacies, competencies and character qualities

• University of Nottingham:

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Theoretical Framework

• socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

  Collaboration and interaction at the heart of all ZPD-based pedagogical approaches (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)

• Task-based learning (Ellis, 2001)
Modes of Collaboration

- **Stage 2 (A2)**
  - 1 x semester
  - Present poster

- **Stage 2 China (A2)**
  - Every other week
  - Group chats on intercultural topics and comparisons

- **Stage 3 (A2-B1)**
  - 3-4 x semester
  - Support class activities; Design and present poster

- **Stage 5 (B2-C1)**
  - Every other week
  - 1:1 interviews: blog writing/designing and presenting poster
Evaluation

Online questionnaires with all participants:

• One questionnaire for all groups of learners
• One questionnaire for the German native speakers
Did you find it useful that German native speakers came to class to work on speaking skills?

Yes
Learners’ comments: positive

They brought the **language to life**

It was a good way of seeing how **students our own age** use German and get their opinion on a range of topics

Got used to **different accents** e.g. Austrian and learned how to **express myself more idiomatically**

It's an invaluable opportunity to be able to come in contact and actually talk to native speakers **even at such German level as we are on**. I think it's very important to speak, in order to learn a language, and getting to cope with the issues like understanding natives.

You really **realize the knowledge** you have about a language.
Learners’ comments: challenges

- sometimes it is hard to express myself and it is hard to know whether I have expressed myself correctly because there is **little comment on this aspect**

- the hardest bit for me was my **lack of vocabulary**. I know it takes time to learn new vocab, but also I felt like this kind of exercise will not really help me improve my vocab and that I should really learn more vocab before I try to speak to natives.

- **embarrassment** and sometimes can't understand them

- **Was quite long and difficult** to speak fluently for that length of time
How did you overcome communication issues?

- I tried to say it in simpler words in German but most of the time that would not work so I had to switch to English, and then the native speaker translated it to me in German and I just repeated the sentence so I can remember it better.
- Used a word in English which they then translated
- express it in German or show image on google
- Ask in English what the phrase would be
- I changed into English or I just did not say anything.
- I worked with my English partner to describe what we wanted to say to the natives.
- either didn't continue to speak or spoke in english
- transfer to English
- Usually just stare at the window for 5 seconds and then tell Laura how sorry I was and ask her in English how to say the certain word.
How did you overcome communication issues?

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Impact as seen by the native speakers

I think the Nottingham students tried to speak even **more correctly** than without having native speakers as a discussion partner.

In the following sessions, the students became more and more communicative, I have the feeling that this exchange or communication practice might even have **taken the fear of speaking** to a single native speaker, who is not their instructor, at least to a small extent.

In a way, I tried to speak slower (although Austrians generally speak slower than Germans. It was an interesting experience, too, to formulate sentences **in a way that leaners of German can understand them** and if I used more uncommon words, to ask them if they understood me.
Benefits as seen by the native speakers

I have definitely benefitted from this project as I have gained experience when it comes to figuring out what possible problems may occur to a learner of a foreign language. As I want to become a language teacher in an EFL setting, this project has helped me to raise my awareness for certain universal foreign language learning issues that are relevant to my work later on.

I definitely have learned a lot about different cultures and had great and interesting discussions about China and the UK. I have also realized how difficult it is to teach a language.
Suggestions for improvement

• maybe an open discuss with the full class and all the exchange students

• it’s good to have a list of vocabulary for discussion set in advance.

• maybe longer and more often

• perhaps build a long term relationship with native speakers could help
Challenges for us

• recruiting available native speaker students

• fitting it all in

• incentive to meet outside the classroom – in the classroom, but not beyond
Next project steps

• Language Centre wide project?
• accredited module?
• Reflection?
• small projects outside the classroom for networking?
• integrate EPOSTL for teacher trainees?
References


And finally......