



The Berlin Project: A Marriage Between Professional Skills and Authentic Language Acquisition

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Abstract

A multi-disciplinarian and intercultural language project

This project aims at increasing the German communicative skills of our Flemish students (professional Bachelor Communication), resulting in a 4 days' stay in Berlin. The project concentrates on intercultural communication, learning to work in team, providing the students with professional skills and last but not least increasing the students' knowledge of German, especially oral fluency and basic vocabulary and grammar.

To prepare the trip to Berlin, the students receive tasks ranging from research on the internet on specific topics, reading authentic texts, writing, summarizing and structuring texts, research into the historical and cultural background of the city and oral presentation of this in class. They also explore a subject of their own interest for which they have to conduct at least two interviews with specialist native speakers in Berlin. Per class they set up a facebook group and communicate with the students of partner schools in Berlin. Last but not least they recapitulate basic grammar and vocabulary.

The activities in Berlin concentrate on communication with native speakers. Our students are guided in Berlin, both by their German-speaking peers of the partner schools and by professionals. Next to all this we have synergies with other subjects of the curriculum such as contemporary history, public relations, marketing, interpersonal skills... Whilst exploring their self-chosen topic (e.g. street theatre), they "encounter" several media. This need for information will lead to authentic communication, a higher level of the students' activity and frequently generates a higher motivation.

Thus, most of the students overcome their prejudices towards German(s) and Germany, the threshold to speak, and improve their language skills considerably. Students also become aware of the necessity of communication and foreign languages. This project and the trip even result in about 10% of our students doing an internship in Berlin/Germany in their last year.

1. Introduction

During the 3rd semester, about 180 students who study to become a "professional bachelor in communication management" are prepared for a one-week study trip to Berlin. These students have to study German as a third foreign language since it is part of their curriculum. Germany is after all one of Belgium's main economic partners and German is its third official language. It is one of the languages you hear all over Europe in the tourist industry, the knowledge of German is an advantage when applying for a job, and Germany offers plenty of possibilities for exchange students...

The general context in which we have been operating for over 15 years is "competence-based learning", defined as the sum of knowledge, attitude and skills (KOK, 2003) [1]. The modern "learning environment" is functional, activating, realistic, inviting to learn, coaching. We are supposed to train students to perform specific and professional tasks.

Since this concept is so widely spread and promoted by Europe, the government and the educational institutions, a so-called "project" and the notion "authenticity" blend in well. Over the past 7 years the project has become an intercultural experience, a language training, a multi-disciplinarian cooperation



with other subjects (history, marketing, PR, interpersonal skills and even the students' native language Dutch). On top of that, it turned out to be a wonderful experience of team building and it also is a lot of fun.

2. Objectives

Over the years we defined and redefined a multitude of objectives. We want students to know quite a bit about the historical background of the city; to get in touch with native speakers (through e-mail, facebook..., face-to-face contacts) who may be peers, ordinary people in the street, professionals; Students have to deal with representative literature excerpts and set up a small research project on a self-chosen subject. The goal of all these tasks being, amongst others, the improvement of the students' language skills and lowering the threshold of speaking another foreign language.

3. Means and methods

To prepare the journey the students have made contacts with native speakers in Berlin and have organised a meeting in Berlin for a brief interview on a self-chosen subject that was approved by the lecturers.

There are a lot of teamwork activities implementing ICT (researching the internet), learning, reading and study activities. Exercises are both oral and written, they will focus on communication, vocabulary, pronunciation and (some elementary) grammar. Students will get in touch with a lot of visual information (tourist highlights, film, historical images, maps, photos...)

The students work on a wide range of different activities, tasks, presentations and even two integrated tests (dealing with grammar and vocabulary recapitulation at the beginning of the semester and an in-depth test on background information).

4. Description of two activities

4.1 "The Exploration" is the Cherry on the Cake

The activity called "exploration" is a thematic research in the target language. The students can choose almost any subject they are interested in (e.g. open air art, fashion, breweries, gay society, chocolate restaurants ...).

Before the trip the students will consult different kinds of media (internet, books, brochures...) in order to find out as much as they can about their topic. Doing this, they will come across some companies, organisations that stand for this. The students will try to get in touch with at least two different companies and set up a meeting for a brief interview. They will report to us – using a special form – about their plans, their contacts, the organisation of the exploration day, the interview questions they prepared for the specialists. This form will be checked on feasibility, in-depth questions and language. During their stay in Berlin the students work independently, planning and sometimes reorganising their trip using public transport. The ideal situation of planning and organising every meeting beforehand can get out of hand once on the spot – just like in real life situations. Students will have to be flexible and rearrange their appointments, they realise that mails are not enough and that a phone call to reconfirm a meeting may do wonders. Of course the lecturers are always close and can always be asked to help. They will make pictures of their meeting, do the interview and gather the necessary information.

After the trip they will do a presentation in the target language to their peers. This is indeed one of the lesser authentic elements in the project, since their peers are Dutch speakers.

4.2 The "TmD" = "Treffen mit Deutschsprachigen" (meeting with native speakers)

Here there clearly is direct and interactive communication. The teachers contacted some universities, university colleges or private schools in Berlin beforehand. They have the promise from the Berlin contacts that a department is willing to work and meet with our students during one afternoon.



Before the trip we have the students write an e-mail, following the instructions in their work book. This mail is a first contact in which they introduce themselves and their college to their Berlin peers (who are we/you? Where will we meet? What could we visit? What do you find interesting?). This mail will be one of the written tasks the students do that will be corrected, according to the guidelines. For the first time last year, we also included the social networksite "facebook", since we had noticed that students spontaneously communicated with some of the Berlin students in the previous year. They only have one instruction: write in German.

During the trip the students meet each other in the different schools. They receive some information on the Berlin school, they exchange information about both countries and ideally they will walk through parts of the city with these students. To break the ice between them, we set up a series of questions, sometimes a little bit provocative, hoping to get them all to talk and discuss.

The overall impression of the students about this afternoon is quite positive. We even hear about contacts that are still vivid in the next year. Yet, this activity fully depends on the eagerness and the time of the Berlin students to talk to our students. Unfortunately, this sometimes, though be it rarely, does not work at all.

4.3 Methodical characteristics, related to these activities

4.3.1 Competence-based

A real need for communication arises. The language is not practised "to be practised" but in order to communicate. The communication exceeds the classroom setting. There is a real "information gap" which needs to be filled in by the target "language": it is logical and necessary to use the target language. We can also refer to the competence-based learning principles: we are dealing with "knowledge" and "skills".

The students learn from professionals: they learn content and they learn language ("knowledge") – they appreciate the need of a foreign language. They learn how to deal with stress and deadlines ("skills", "attitude"). And they learn how to look for information (the internet, dictionaries: "knowledge", "skills" and "attitude")

4.3.2 Informal learning

The set of activities also wonderfully blend in with what Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm (2003) [2] call "non-formal learning". Since "Life-Long learning" has become important, there is an increasing interest for learning activities that occur outside the formal classroom, independent from direct teachers' instructions. We clearly notice that there is a lot of accidental, implicit learning during the Berlin Project.

5. Authenticity

5.1 A Definition

Information must be made **meaningful** to the students: that is what authentic learning is about. The environment in which the learning takes place must also be meaningful. Students should learn about things that will / could happen in real life.

As Brown, Duguid and Colins (1989) [3] state "activity, concept and culture are interdependent. No one can be totally understood without the other two. Learning must involve all three." In order to apply this theory we, lecturers, try to use topical issues to motivate the students. Students must be able to realise that their achievements stretch beyond the walls of the classroom. They no longer learn in abstract or artificial situations but they experience and use information in ways that are grounded in reality.

The criteria for authenticity are: meaningful information; meaningful environment, reality and real world challenges.



5.2 Authenticity applied to the Berlin Project

5.2.1 Meaningful information: authentic to a high degree

Activities: looking up information for their research activity, finding out how expensive train tickets are, finding out how to get to a certain place, in order to meet the person they have an appointment with, reading texts on city life.

Our criteria: content requirements

5.2.2 Meaningful environment: authentic to a high degree

Activities: Preparation: in Belgium

The students spend a week in Berlin, have a guided tour, have conversations with native speakers, order food in restaurants etc...

5.2.3 Reality, real world challenges:

quite authentic, but many challenges are lecturer-induced

Activities 1. originating from an authentic need : asking the way, asking for information they need for their research project, asking permission to take pictures, ...

2. lecturer-induced: do research on historical topics, read literature, have tests on grammar, vocabulary,....

Our criteria: content requirements

5.2.4 Activity, concept, culture are interdependent:

thus, our Berlin Project is authentic to a high degree.

5.3 Authenticity, the sacred cow?

Authenticity is important to us, BUT

- 1) students cannot be exposed to too risky and unsafe conditions
- 2) students cannot be expected to perform tasks too difficult or complicated
- 3) the lecturer is there and

- a) teaches, corrects
- b) activates
- c) coaches, helps when necessary

4) Even if a task, a setting or a criterion is not a 100 % authentic, it doesn't mean we would reject it. There are also other reasons to opt for certain types of exercises.

6. Integrated skills result in synergies

As mentioned at the beginning, the Berlin Project is not just about language learning. Our professional Bachelors in Communication Management are exposed to authentic language and challenges to interact naturally. Hence, the language becomes a real means of communication and this can be highly motivating. Subjects such as contemporary history, interpersonal communication, marketing, public relations and even Dutch, the students' mother tongue, are integrated in the project. And the advantages of integrated skills are multiple [4] OXFORD:

- German language learners are exposed to authentic language;
- The interaction in the target language becomes a challenge;
- Students recognize the richness and complexity of the German language;
- Students understand that German is not just a key to passing an examination; but,
- German becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people;
- Teachers can track the students' progress in multiple skills at the same time;
- It promotes the learning of real content, not just the analysis of language forms;
- Authentic contact can be highly motivating to students.



7. The Berlin aftermath

And indeed, practice makes perfect ("Übung macht den Meister"). Having started out with all the known prejudices against the German language, people and culture we seem to be doing very well. Most of the students start out with German in a negative way: they hate the language because they heard it is difficult, they do not like it, they would much rather learn a more exotic language such as Spanish (or Italian?), and they do not know why they should learn yet another foreign language. And there is also the historical background which still is in people's minds – even after several generations, it seems to be inherited, or is it a kind of collective memory?

The synergy with the subject Marketing this year resulted in a beautiful project: students had to draw the attention of the media to a German word and try to make it popular. And the media promised to come: one of the most important Flemish TV channels VTM.

However, after the Berlin Project and in spite of all the negativity 10% of our last year students want to do an internship of three months in Berlin. To us, this is a big success and a proof that even students who primarily hated the language finally commit themselves to a three months' internship in Berlin.

References

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