

Learning German in intergenerational conversations

1. Regular sessions throughout the school year

The Monash Intergenerational Language Project 2010-2012 showed that regular interaction between students and elderly German-speakers was beneficial to both parties.

The conversations provided the elderly with a purpose through the sharing of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, which was also emotionally and socially satisfying.

The students were able to test their comprehension and spoken abilities, and to learn conversational strategies, such as asking for clarification when they didn't understand something (wie bitte?), asking questions to move the conversation along, expanding their vocabulary.

The elderly unhesitatingly adopted the role of 'language teachers', with various strategies to assist the students' comprehension (repetition, checking they were understood, reformulating questions, using English to explain) and to guide the conversation, which included asking students about themselves.

Not documented, but anecdotal evidence also revealed that as part of their VCE assessment, two students constructed their own interviews, which meant they wrote and read in German, and asked follow-up questions of the elderly.

2. Online sessions

This idea was trialled with Level 2 primary school children as a DET project, with me talking with the students in four online sessions. The students learnt to read two Oma Online stories in the classroom and also did other language activities centred on the dogs. When tested by Lili Cvetkovic from the DET, the comparisons between first and last readings showed significant improvement for all students, on average by 40%

For this group of students, clear motivational factors were the text materials - i.e. the dogs - but also that the activity involved a grandparent, a family figure that the students could relate to and trusted.

3. Visits to elderly care homes - Martin Luther, Templar Homes

Catherine and I tried this with two Year 10 students, who were able to try out their German skills. Notably, one of them stated that this was a 'real' experience, unlike the role plays that were presented in classroom textbooks.

Such visits would also fulfil the community service component that many schools offer. It would also be possible to hold skype sessions as the care homes have online facilities.

4. Visits to Schools / Incursions

Armed with a Working with Children check, I visited Amsleigh Park and Carrum PS to talk about my dogs and Christmas traditions, and at Caulfield Grammar School I talked with a group of Year 9 students about Kartoffelpuffer, my childhood, and migration experience. Perhaps you know that at last year's conference, students from Carrum PS gave two presentations in German based on topics they had discussed with me and another grandparent.

Note: German-speaking migrants tend to be fluent in English, the use of which was useful in all these interactions.

In the Victorian Curriculum under 'Learning in German', it specifically states that-

“Students will have opportunities to engage with members of the community who speak German, which in some cases will be facilitated via digital technologies”

Brigitte Lambert contribution to AGTV Committee presentation at the GI National Conference in 2018