

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

*U-Bahn: A low-stress, community building activity based on course material*

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My favorite course to teach is beginning German. Over the course of two to four semesters, depending on the sequence, I am able to guide students with no German language ability to somewhere between survival ability and the ability to function in a German speaking environment. I have had success with an eclectic theoretical approach, using aspects of various methodologies. Most of my instruction is based on a combination of methodologies for communicative competence and a naturalized approach, which has foundations in comprehensible input as a requisite for understanding and ultimately producing a foreign language. In practice, this includes instruction in structure, vocabulary, minimal grammar, and cultural comparison within the skill areas of listening, reading and writing, but class time is focused on speaking practice.

Speaking in a foreign language is an important and useful skill. Most students studying a foreign language want to be able to speak it, but beginning students in foreign language classes often come with fear of having to speak that language in class and make embarrassing errors in front of other students. Foreign language instructors need to promote activities to lessen student anxiety so that students are able to learn the material in a relaxed mental state. Stephen Krashen has researched and written extensively on lowering what he terms the “affective filter.” If students are overly anxious, lack motivation, or suffer from low self-esteem, they will have

difficulty in acquiring a second language. Krashen argues within his Second Language Acquisition theory that this filter must be lowered intentionally by instructors so that students are able to hear, understand, and recognize what is comprehensible and what is not (Krashen, 1987, 1988, 2018).

In the past, I often assigned small group speaking practice, based on suggested activities from the text, or worksheets I had created. Although students felt safer speaking in front of a small number of other students, and would be able to complete the activities, this did not always transfer to the ability to speak freely. I also used open-ended questions at the beginning of class, and found that while students struggled, they slowly began to become more confident speaking freely, especially in second or third semester classes. I then created a free speaking activity for the students' final semester in the language sequence. Based on reading current events, writing a summary, and finally an oral report to the class in an unscripted talk. Initially frightening for some, nearly all students became comfortable speaking freely in German by the end of the semester.

As students may try to avoid speaking, they must be given the opportunity to speak as part of a group, rather than individually so they do not experience performance fear. They must also be given the opportunity to speak extensively, rather than be limited to short formulaic answers in a question and answer activity. Extensive speaking, even with pronunciation and grammar errors, is key to improving students' motivation as well as their fluency.

To address the fact that I wanted students to begin speaking freely from the beginning to develop speaking as they study, I introduced the *U-Bahn*, the German term for a subway. To ensure that students would take the activity seriously, the *U-Bahn* is a quiz, but everyone in the class gets the same grade, and that the grade starts with a perfect 10/10. The grade is based on

speaking only in German during the activity. Should anyone in the class speak in English, everyone's grade drops to 9/10, and so on. Students are not required to speak error-free in this activity, and the theme for each *U-Bahn* is based on the material being learned. Students speak to another student in German, listen to their partner's talk, then rotate and repeat with a new partner. The entire activity takes about 10-15 minutes, and overcomes one of the initial challenges in beginning language courses, namely to get the students talking and communicating in the language as soon as possible.

How to use the U-Bahn activity:

- Teach the material (vocabulary and structures in this example) on the first day of the semester. Introduce the concept of the *U-Bahn*, namely that no English is allowed, that the entire class will receive the same grade for the oral quiz, and that students are not allowed notes or to read prepared sentences.
- Assign students to practice the material as homework. Some topics might need a photo or illustration to support the activity, and students will need time to prepare and practice.
- On the second day of class, review the assigned material on the projector, or board, writing key words (nouns, infinitives, adjectives), but not complete sentences. This ensures that students have a safety net once the speaking begins.
- Have the students form a double line in such a way that each student has another student directly in front of them, much as people sit on a subway car. It may be necessary to have a group of three at the end of the line if the number of students in the class is uneven. Instruct them in how to move to a new speaking partner (rotate counterclockwise so that everyone has a new student as a partner for each encounter).
- Ask for last questions in English, reminding them that English stops when the quiz starts.

- Tell students the words or phrases, which they do not otherwise know, that will be used to ask them to stop, rotate positions, when to restart and to end (I use German subway travel terminology). Ask for English questions on the procedure one last time.
- Begin the exercise. The length of time between rotations to a new partner depends on the material being practiced. Beginners generally have 30 second to 1 minute encounters, but more advanced topics might need longer.
- The instructor's role is to listen for English, and to note common errors for plenary review after the quiz.
- Rotate at least four or five times, or until everyone has talked to everyone else. In each rotation a student has a new partner with whom the same conversation is repeated.
- Finish the activity and assign the final quiz grade to the class.
- In a plenary review, ask for questions, then address common errors.

In previous academic years, I waited for two or three weeks to begin these speaking activities, thinking that students needed time to get used to the class, how I teach them, and to become comfortable and safe with each other. As part of my ongoing reflection on how to improve students' fluency in speaking so that a native speaker could understand, I decided to begin this activity of the second day of the class. I posited that introducing a speaking activity this early would help create an expectation of speaking within the course, and that students' ability to speak would improve, since speaking fluency is tied to time spent speaking.

I was very surprised with the results from this early introduction of speaking. Students took the requirement of only speaking German very seriously. In fact, this year was the first time students have spoken only in German on the initial activity. These results suggest that their

unfamiliarity with each other caused them to be warier of speaking English and endangering the group grade.

It is important to note that at this point in the semester students had very limited vocabulary and language structures, and knowledge of cultural practices, i.e., greetings, exchanging names, handling introductions. As students spoke and listened to their speaking partner, and repeated in the rotations, they became increasingly comfortable. The class started out reserved and halting, but after several rotations, it became lively, with minimal evidence of hesitancy. This phenomenon is common with this activity, and an integral part of what makes it non-threatening.

I found another, unexpected advantage of introducing this speaking assessment early in the semester. Students speaking German to their classmates in personalized meaningful conversation start to get to know and trust each other, especially as they often struggle with the same difficulties. I observed that a sense of community began to grow immediately within the class, where students helped their partners when one struggled by modeling sample sentences if their partner was frustrated or unable to participate fully.

The *U-Bahn* is a simple but fun assessment that helps students begin to speak in German, and is perceived by students as foundational in developing speaking fluency. The innovation in this activity consists of my reflection on past student behavior and performance, followed by informed small improvements. If I had ever experienced a negative reaction to this activity, I might have considered redesigning or eliminating it. However, careful planning and regular small changes have resulted in a better activity, such as the example described here. I believe that the *U-Bahn* could be adapted to any discipline where oral communication is a focus and where students may be anxious about that communication.

References

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