



## **Teaching German Dialects through Interviews and Projects**

Theresa Schenker, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

ISSN 1470 – 9570

## Teaching German Dialects through Interviews and Projects

Theresa Schenker, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

All German teaching in the United States often focuses primarily on Standard High German with little attention paid to German varieties and dialects (Ruck 2017; van Kerckvoorde 2012). While textbooks tend to include a cursory look at Swiss and/or Austrian German (Abrams & Schiestl 2017), students often have little opportunity to get to know the dialectal landscape of German-speaking countries let alone the meaning of dialects for the community where they are spoken. In order to help students understand the German language in all its variety, two projects were incorporated in an advanced German class on the *History of the German Language* taught at a private college in the US. These projects allowed students to learn about dialects in German-speaking countries directly from speakers of different variants. This article outlines both projects whose goal was to provide students with opportunities for language practice with German speakers in Germany while at the same time allowing them to gain insights in German dialects and variants and their connection to identity. One project included interviews with dialect speakers, an analysis of the interview, an introduction of the dialect on a course website, and an in-class presentation. The second project consisted of three videoconferences with senior citizens in Germany. The article will also present students' feedback gathered to assess their experience with the projects and their effects on learners' language skills and understanding of dialects. Lastly, the article presents further suggestions for teaching about dialects that can help to provide a more nuanced view of German language speakers around the world.

### 1. Literature Review

Dialects and variants of German play a minor role in the landscape of German instruction at US institutions of higher education and the most commonly used textbooks contain little information about Austrian and Swiss German or German dialects (Abrams & Schiestl 2017; van Kerckvoorde 2012). A survey of 19 US textbooks of German revealed that while all referenced dialects to some extent, only two included options for students to hear what the variant sounds like (Allison 2008). An analysis of five common German textbooks from 2012 revealed that they at least included some information about Switzerland and Austria, but all clearly emphasize that Germany “matters most” (van Kerckvoorde 2012: 181).

Some textbooks published in Germany present a more balanced approach to Austrian and Swiss German than most books published in the US (van Kerckvoorde 2012: 181), but it

varies greatly. *StudioD*, for example, doesn't include any regional variation but *DaF kompakt neu* includes German varieties but nothing about Swiss and Austrian standards (Feddersen 2024: 173-174).

While some instructors attempt to incorporate diverse dialects in their teaching, for example through films and videos, it is often easier when teachers themselves speak a dialect (Milojčić 2023: 461). In a survey of 40 high school and college teachers of German in the US, half of them reported teaching about dialects while the other half preferred to focus only on standard German (Allison 2008). No demographic information was collected about the instructors, but they taught at different levels including high school levels 1-4 and advanced placement classes, as well as all college levels of German (p. 48).

The standard German that is predominantly taught to US college students, however, typically does not correspond well to the spoken realities in the German-speaking world. Germany has two principal dialect areas with four smaller dialect regions that encompass 16-20 further dialect groups. Standard German is most often used in written (formal) communication and by news and radio reporters. In everyday communication, Standard German is often mixed with local linguistic peculiarities, also called regiolect varieties (Kehrein 2020; see also Ammon, 1995). While in general, there seem to be fewer dialect speakers in Germany than in the past, “nearly all native speakers of German display some regiolectal competence and use at least one speaking style of this variety in their everyday communication” (Kehrein 2020: 1366). In order to show students that German is a pluricentric language, instructors should embrace dialects and regional varieties in their German classes (Ruck 2020; Thaler 2023; van Kerckvoorde 2012). A study by Baßler and Spiekermann (2001) confirmed that learners of German (albeit in Germany) find it important to learn about dialects and especially to develop the ability to understand dialects when they are spoken. Similarly, speakers of different languages living in Switzerland attend specific Swiss German dialect classes in order to improve their understanding and communication abilities in Swiss (Feuz 2001).

US students who communicate with native speakers, who visit a German-speaking country or who study abroad will undoubtedly be confronted with regional varieties and preparing them for the types of linguistic differences they may encounter can ease their transition into the German-speaking world (Wuensch & Bolter 2020). The language spoken by native speakers is often vastly different from students' classroom language and

it can be very frustrating for students not to be able to understand speakers of German. Additionally, in certain parts of the German-speaking world, such as Switzerland, many people prefer speaking regional varieties (Feuz 2001) and it may be very difficult for students to successfully communicate there without any training in Swiss German.

A study by Lam and O'Brien (2014) found that students of German in Canada in general showed very poor understanding of German dialects, regardless of their proficiency level. The authors conclude that it is important to provide exposure to dialects for learners of German. Wuensch & Bolter (2020: 63) support this view and suggest that “any language course that seeks to prepare its students for a real-life experience in a German speaking-country, or with native speakers in general, should include non-standard varieties in its curriculum.” Even though more advanced learners may find it easier to acquire receptive or basic productive dialect skills, most researchers suggest that even at beginning language levels, students should be made aware of the pluralistic landscape of the German-speaking world (Ruck 2020). As Lughofer (2021: 26) highlights:

“Ebenso sollte ein niederes Sprachniveau und fehlende Erfahrung bezüglich Dialekten der Lernenden nicht vom Thema abschrecken. Die Bewusstwerdung der Sprachwirklichkeit in den deutschsprachigen Ländern sollte durchaus schon an früheren Lernpunkten gefördert werden.”

However, exposure alone may not be enough to prepare students for real-life interaction with German speakers as a study by Schoonmaker-Gates (2017) revealed. According to this study, both exposure to but also explicit teaching of dialect features in Spanish predicted students' dialect recognition. The author suggests that exposure to dialects can be accomplished through authentic films and TV shows, invited native guest speakers, connecting students with native speakers of the community, listening to authentic radio or podcasts, to name a few. To make dialect learning explicit, “considerable discussion of and reflection about the dialectal characteristics that students observed” (Schoonmaker-Gates 2017: 189) has to be incorporated in the classroom. The dialect features to focus on should also be level-appropriate for the students (Studer 2002). Selecting which dialect (features) or regional varieties to incorporate in German as a foreign language classes may be a challenge for instructors (Ruck 2020), however, and may be one reason why a large number of teachers prefer to avoid teaching dialects (Allison 2008).

Research has shown that both exposure to and explicit teaching of dialect features can be beneficial for students' dialect perception (Schoonmaker-Gates 2017) and a few

suggestions have been made in previous literature for teaching German dialects in US German language classes or even for teaching German dialects across the world, such as Pennsylvania Dutch (Allison 2008; Meindl 2016). Ruck (2020) recommends incorporating units on dialects throughout the German curriculum from beginning to advanced classes. She suggests incorporating spoken and audiovisual materials with non-standard varieties.

Some publications make specific recommendations for teaching units on dialects and varieties which can be helpful for instructors who are looking for inspiration. For example, a unit on the Bavarian dialect could include songs by popular Bavarian singers, explicit instruction of Bavarian sound differences, playful oral practice of Bavarian pronunciation of words, and games such as memory to get to know different words used in this dialect (Wuensch & Bolter 2020). Flüe-Fleck & Hove (1994) recommend teaching Swiss varieties in combination with culture units about Switzerland. They also suggest focusing on phonetical and intonation differences of this German variant.

Dialects can also be taught through literature. Thaler (2023) suggests using poems by the author Maridl Innerhofer from South Tyrol to help students get to know the dialect as well as emotional world of dialect speakers. In addition to trying to translate the poems into Standard German, the author suggests having students draw images before interpreting the poems together. Even canonical German literature such as Buddenbrooks and many poems lend themselves to teaching about dialects as many include specific German varieties (Lughofer 2021).

Studer (2002) suggests teaching dialects with the principle of understanding dialects but speaking and writing in Standard German which puts an emphasis on listening and reading comprehension skills. For example, students can listen to a talk in Swiss German with an accompanying Standard German transcript and then listen a second time without the transcript. Similarly, Lughofer (2021) finds a focus on promoting receptive dialect skills useful for German language classes. In his article about Business German in Slovenia, he argues that receptive variety competence especially about Bavarian can be developed in German for special purposes courses by integrating authentic videos, interviews, and songs.

For further information, the website *Regionalsprache.de* serves as a wonderful resource for instructors interested in incorporating dialects into their German classes (Pheiff, Pistor, & Wolanska 2019).

## 2. Background and Rationale

In spite of the pluricentricity of the German language, there is still a lack of knowledge of how to best incorporate the teaching of dialects and German variants into language classes at the university level. In order to familiarize advanced learners of German with non-standard varieties of German two projects were implemented in a class called *The History of the German Language* which will be explained in more detail in the next section. The class is an advanced language class that all students who have completed at least two years of college German or the equivalent may take. It meets twice a week for 75 minutes and is taught entirely in German with all readings and assignments also in German. It is not a required class for majors but as an advanced language class it can be applied both toward the major or toward the department's certificate of advanced language proficiency. Students have to take four advanced language classes to obtain the certificate. *The History of the German Language* was also cross listed with the linguistics department, so students were able to receive a linguistics credit for it and they were also allowed to count it as a humanities credit. From the instructor's experience of teaching the class, the majority of students took it as one of their four classes to complete the certificate.

The *History of the German Language* class is an ideal space for incorporating lessons on dialects and German varieties because it provides an overview of the development of the language, and the dialectal and regional varieties play a large role in the history of the language. In addition to units on contemporary language change, youth language, media language, and "Denglish", the course spent several weeks getting to know German dialects through films and literature. Specifically, students used the dialect editions of the series *Asterix and Obelix* to identify and analyze the features of different German dialects including Saxonian, Bavarian, Swabian, Hessian, Franconian, and others. The class watched the movie "Das finstere Tal" (Prochaska 2014) to learn more about the Austrian dialect, and the Swiss movie "Der Goalie bin ig" (Boss 2014) for an introduction to Swiss German.

### 3. Dialect Projects

The course was taught in spring 2018 and spring 2021 and included a dialect project that connected students with a dialect speaker abroad. The dialect speakers were volunteered and recruited via the instructor's personal network in Germany as well as through recommendations from colleagues. The goal was for students to get to know one dialect in more depth by interacting with a native speaker. The project consisted of six steps, outlined in Table 1, that were completed over the course of the semester. Some steps took significantly more time than others and were therefore worth more points. Overall, the project was worth 45% of the final course grade. Other graded course components included two oral presentations (15%), attendance/participation (10%), and homework (30%) including assigned readings, pre-class discussions and oral reflections, and vocabulary lists.

Step 1	Research about the dialect/variety [history, development, characteristics...]
Step 2	Preparation of interview questions
Step 3	20–30-minute interview online with a speaker of the dialect/variety (speaker provided by instructor, interview recorded)
Step 4	Written analysis of the interview with focus on the following aspects: <i>How does partner view the importance of their dialect (in which situation do they use the dialect? How/where did they learn the dialect? Is it important to them to speak this dialect?)</i> <i>Provide examples of the dialect in your partner's responses and their standard high German equivalent (what are the typical characteristics of this dialect?)</i> <i>How did student feel hearing the dialect: what was easy/difficult/ impossible to understand?</i>
Step 5	Posting clip of interview and analysis to class blog
Step 6	Final paper including introduction of dialect, interview partner, and interview analysis

Table 1: Stages of the Dialect Project

In a first step, each student selected a dialect for which the instructor had identified interview partners and began researching the features and history of this dialect. They wrote a brief introduction to the dialect of no more than three pages summarizing their findings. Next, they prepared five to ten interview questions for their 20-30-minute online conversation with a speaker of the dialect. As part of the interview, which students scheduled independently outside of class, the dialect speaker was asked to answer one question fully in their dialect. After the interview, students analyzed the recording of the conversation focusing on a few specific questions and providing examples of the dialect

which they identified in a four-to-five-page paper. They posted the clip of the interview in which the dialect speaker spoke their dialect to a class blog, where they also wrote an introduction to the dialect and an explanation of the dialect features audible in the interview clip. The idea of the class blog was to allow other instructors to use the dialect clips in their own teachings and enable other students to hear what different dialects sound like. Interview partners had given permission for their voice to be posted to the blog hosted on a university website only accessible to members of the university. At the end of the semester students wrote a final paper about their dialect research, introduction of partner and interview analysis.

In 2021 a second project was added to the *History of the German language* course in order to further promote the learning about dialects as well as to provide more opportunities for interacting with native speakers and developing advanced speaking language skills. This project was a virtual exchange with senior citizens in Germany. Students had three 15-30-minute conversations with senior citizens from different German regions who either spoke dialects themselves or were familiar with them through friends or family or having lived in different parts of Germany. The first session was devoted specifically to discussing dialects, while the second session focused on language development and change. The third session dealt with languages in general, language learning, and the importance of knowing multiple languages/ dialects. The project was organized using the free program Language Line which connects learners of German, Russian, or French with senior citizen volunteers in the countries where those languages are spoken for online conversation and exchange (TheLanguageLineProgram 2021).

## **4. Students' Perceptions of Dialect Projects**

### **4.1. Methods and Data Analysis**

In order to gather student feedback, survey and consent forms were designed and approved by the university's ethics commission. After signing a printed consent form that gave the researcher permission to analyze students' surveys and dialect-related classwork including reflections and papers, an anonymous feedback survey (survey 1, see appendix) was administered via Qualtrics at the conclusion of the spring 2018 and spring 2021 courses to learn more about students' experiences with the project.

Survey 1 consisted of nine questions: six Likert-Scale items, two open-ended questions, and one optional question for further comments. Both semesters combined, 17 students



responded to the first survey (11 out of 13 enrolled students in 2018 and six out of 12 enrolled students in 2021). No further demographical data was collected from the students.

In 2021, an additional survey (survey 2, see appendix) was administered at the end of the class to better understand students' assessments of the video chats with senior citizens in Germany. Survey 2 consisted of 13 Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions, one open-ended question, as well as one option for further comments. Several of the questions were for background on students' experiences with virtual exchanges in previous classes and will not be reported in this article. Both surveys were distributed anonymously through Qualtrics. In 2021, 11 of 13 enrolled students completed the second survey which assessed their perception of dialect learning through videoconferences with senior citizens.

Surveys were analyzed to report descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively for major trends and themes. In addition, students' final research papers based on their dialect interviews were analyzed qualitatively to learn more about their perception of the project and for triangulation of data.

## **4.2 Results**

Most students (76.5%) strongly agreed that they have enjoyed learning about dialects through an interview with a native speaker, while 17.6% somewhat agreed and one student somewhat disagreed. In general, the results indicate that students enjoyed the project and perceived it as having contributed to their learning in many ways.

The results showed that 88% of students felt that the interview with a speaker of a German dialect improved their understanding of German dialects and variants. Specifically, students noted that the dialect project was "really effective and unique," "a very fun learning experience," "awesome," and "far more valuable as a learning experience [than previous course projects]."

Students reported having perceived positive effects of the interview and dialect project on their language skills. One student wrote that "[i]t definitely improved my speaking and listening skills" and another explained: "I believe interviewing the speaker helped me improve my German skills since it was less of a controlled environment than classroom and I had to improvise more." Another noted that "[r]esearching the dialect and writing a formal paper for the Dialect Analysis was very helpful in improving my written German.

The interview itself was not that helpful in improving my spoken German, given that it was only for an hour or so, but it was still interesting.”

Similarly, 94% of students reported having learned a great deal or a lot about German dialects through the interview project and other course components. Specific questions about the benefits of using movies to understand dialects also showed positive evaluations results. 76% of students strongly or somewhat agreed that these movies helped them improve their understanding of dialects and variants. 24% of students neither agreed nor disagreed or somewhat disagreed that movies had been helpful. Two students commented on the movies in the optional open-ended questions for further comments. One wrote: “Enjoyed the movies, [the Swiss movie] was a good opportunity to truly see how different Swiss German is from Standard German.” The other one explained that “[t]he movies were great even though the Swiss one was really difficult to understand.”

Students reported that learning about dialects is important to them (88% of students strongly agreed and 12% somewhat agreed). Responses to the open-ended question underlined this. When asked if German classes should focus more on teaching about German dialects and variants, almost all students responded with yes, but many (58%) explained that it is only necessary in specific classes like *The History of the German Language*. Most wrote that it should be integrated but not as the main focus of the classes. One student, for example, wrote: “I think getting exposure is nice, but since most German-speaking people are familiar with standard German, it should be the main priority.” Another noted:

“I think the most amount of time should be spent on Hochdeutsch, just because any students learning German would most likely use Hochdeutsch most of the time. I think some time should definitely be devoted to German dialects and varieties, though – they're a part of German culture and heritage and it's important (and fun) to learn about them!”

Seven students expressed that more emphasis should be given to dialects, and the reasons provided include: “because otherwise a student might assume that all German sounds the same and then can't properly apply what they've learned,” and “they are integral parts of German speakers' identities and reveal much of the language's history,” as well as “language variety is super important.”

Survey 2, in which students in spring 2021 evaluated their virtual exchange with German senior citizens, received eleven responses. Of these, 55% strongly agreed and 36% somewhat agreed that they had enjoyed the video chat sessions. When asked what they

had enjoyed most about the sessions, students' responses mostly fell into two categories: learning about the personal lives of their conversation partners and the enthusiasm of the senior citizens. Students enjoyed, for example, "to hear a bit of their life stories," or "about their personal lives." Students also mentioned that the senior citizens were very engaged and interested in the conversations which can be seen in the following response: "The seniors seemed to have enthusiasm to talk with us, which made it an enjoyable experience." Their enthusiasm was noted as one of the main strengths of the virtual exchange: "It was wonderful to see how engaged they were and excited they were to connect with us."

While 45.5% of students strongly agreed that the three conversations had improved their German speaking skills, 27.3% only somewhat agreed and another 27.3% neither agreed nor disagreed. The same number of students felt that the exchange had contributed to their learning about German culture. However, 73% of students strongly agreed that the virtual chats had improved their listening skills. 82% of students also expressed that three online conversations were a good amount for one semester while 18% felt that fewer sessions would have been enough. About half of the respondents (47%) felt that the video sessions had given them a new perspective about German dialects, but 13% did not feel this way and another 13% were unsure. 35% selected other; one student, for example, explained as "other" that the conversations were interesting, but that their partners predominantly spoke standard German.

Lastly, students were asked to evaluate the program that was used for connecting with the senior citizens (TheLanguageLineProgram 2021) and some students voiced some dissatisfaction over the attendance of a moderator in the sessions, as well as the fact that they did not know who their partner would be before the chat which meant that a few students spoke to the same partner more than once. Some of the concerns mentioned in students' survey responses about the senior citizen chats may be attributed to the fact that the program is both relatively new and free of charge so there are some organizational issues that should be improved. These issues may also have contributed to some students feeling that three sessions were too much. If all students could have spoken to three different senior citizens from different regions of Germany it would likely have been perceived as more beneficial.

In general students enjoyed both projects but the research of one dialect and interview with one dialect speaker seemed to have been more successful. Students felt that it had

contributed more to their learning about dialects than the three conversations with senior citizens. Students' general interest in learning about dialects is in line with previous research (Baßler & Spiekermann 2001; Milojičić 2023). Students' final papers and dialect analyses further revealed their positive reactions to the interview project. One student, for example, wrote:

Das Interview war einer meiner Lieblingsmomente im Kurs. Ich habe sehr viel davon gelernt. Ich wusste schon, dass es viele verschiedene Dialekte in Deutschland gibt, aber ich kannte keine anderen außer Bairisch. Es wurde aber sehr schnell klar, dass die deutsche Sprache und die Entwicklung davon viel komplexer war, als ich dachte. Ich habe vom Interview gelernt, dass solche Beweise von dieser Komplexität, wie Dialekte, auch sehr viel Bedeutung für die Menschen haben, die sie sprechen. *[The interview was one of my favorite moments of the course. I learned a lot from it. I already knew that there were many different dialects in Germany, but I didn't know any other than Bavarian. However, it very quickly became clear that the German language and the development of it was much more complex than I thought. I learned from the interview that evidence of this complexity, such as dialects, also has a lot of meaning for the people who speak it.]* translation provided by author. Original German response not edited]

Another student wrote that only by speaking with a member of the dialect group can one really get to know the dialect. As the student who researched Austrian explained:

Ein Interview mit einem gebürtigen Österreicher, um mehr über seine Sprache zu lernen, war eine sehr interessante Erfahrung. Ich war beeindruckt, wie einfach es war, seine Sprache zu verstehen, und ich habe das Gefühl, dass er nicht versucht hat, mich zu schonen. Das Interview mit einem Muttersprachler ergänzt die Forschung, da es viele populäre Ausdrücke gibt, die man kaum in einem Wörterbuch findet, die aber der Sprecher jeden Tag verwendet. Nur wenn man mit einem Muttersprachler spricht, kann man auch feststellen, welche Besonderheiten des Dialekts auffallen. Die Erfahrung, Martin<sup>1</sup> zu interviewen, war ausgezeichnet und hat mich mehr daran interessiert, mehr über Österreich und das österreichische Deutsch zu lernen. *[Interviewing a native Austrian to learn more about his language was a very interesting experience. I was impressed by how easy it was to understand his language and I have the feeling that he wasn't trying to go easy on me. The interview with a native speaker complements the research, as there are many popular expressions that you can hardly find in a dictionary, but which the speaker uses every day. Only by talking to a native speaker can you find out which dialect peculiarities stand out. The experience of interviewing Martin was excellent and made me more interested in learning more about Austria and Austrian German.]* translation provided by author. Original German response not edited]

Students also noted that dialects are a very interesting part of the German language and that they can sound quite nice. One student commented on his experience about interviewing a Swiss speaker:

Dialekte sind ein großer Teil der deutschen Sprache und weil sie in Amerika fehlen, habe ich nicht gewusst, dass sie so anders sein können. Ich musste das Audio oft wiederholen, aber als ich es voll verstanden habe, konnte ich wirklich den Dialekt genießen. Wie [mein

---

<sup>1</sup> Name was changed.

Partner] gesagt hat, ist Schweizerisch sehr melodisch und es klingt wie ein Lied. Das war wirklich schön zu hören, und ich habe nicht gewusst, dass die deutsche Sprache so interessant klingen kann. *[Dialects are a big part of the German language and because they are absent in America, I didn't realize they could be so different. I had to repeat the audio a lot, but once I fully understood it, I could really enjoy the dialect. Like [my partner] said, Swiss is very melodic and it sounds like a song. That was really nice to hear and I didn't realize that the German language could sound so interesting.]*

Like this student, many others noted that they were not aware of the many differences between standard German and its dialects and variants, and the dialect interview project was a good opportunity for students to gain insights into the pluralistic landscape of the German language.

## 5. Conclusion and Further Suggestions

Even though a limitation of this project is the small sample size and lack of control group, the dialect projects as part of *The History of a German Language* college course were overall an effective way to introduce German dialects and allow students to dive deeper into one specific German variant. The survey results showed that most students appreciated the opportunity to interview a dialect speaker and found the project to be a valuable addition to the class and to their overall language and culture learning. In line with prior research (Baßler & Spiekermann, 2001), results showed that students enjoy learning about dialects. However, it also showed that students feel that dialect learning should not be the sole focus of an advanced language class.

The project with senior citizens was also perceived positively by students, though the dialect interview was seen as more beneficial. The video chats with senior citizens were predominantly appreciated for their effects on students' listening skills. Some dissatisfaction was voiced over the set up and moderation of the chats through the organizer (TheLanguageLineProgram 2021), and future projects of this kind should consider one-on-one or small group voice chats without the presence of an outside moderator. This kind of set up could make students more comfortable to discuss their ideas freely. Additionally, in future video chat projects, selecting speakers from different dialectal backgrounds for each session could give students opportunities to learn about multiple dialects and views on German variants. However, it may be difficult to find enough volunteers for an extended project of this kind.

Instructors who may not have the resources or time to dedicate to larger dialect projects such as the ones outlined in this article can still incorporate dialects as topics of instruction

in their language classes. In the language program at the private college where the current study was conducted, two dialect activities were designed and incorporated at the intermediate language level in year two of German. The first activity was a virtual escape room about German communities in the world. Through an escape room students have a chance to practice their language skills in a gamified environment (Costa 2020; Mudure-Iacob 2021). These types of experiences can have a motivational effect on students and can also foster their critical thinking skills (Jonge & Labrador 2020). An escape room on German minorities gives students a chance to explore where in the world German is spoken outside of the three major German-speaking countries. Students can learn about Pennsylvania Dutch, Texas German, and other variants of the language through a series of puzzles, crossword games, video-based questions, and other engaging activities all while competing against others in the class.

The virtual escape room on German communities across the world is explained in more detail in Schenker and Kraemer (2022). It is always a favorite activity of students and well-worth the time it takes to set it up. Such an activity can be a great way to wrap up or introduce a unit on dialects of German communities across the world in high intermediate or advanced language classes. At our college, we include this escape room in second-year German classes and students have enjoyed it very much.

Another option for promoting teaching about dialects is a final video project about German communities outside Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Such a project is included in intermediate German at the private college where the current study took place. For this final project, groups of three to four students select one German community which they research and about which they then create a documentary movie. Students have to write and revise a script and follow guidelines such as including both image, text and sound in their videos. Another requirement is to focus on the language spoken in these communities and explain some similarities and differences between the community's language and standard German. At the end of the semester, students present their documentaries in class. In the past, students selected the German communities in Texas, Pennsylvania, and Namibia, and a few students presented documentaries on Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, and South Tyrol.

Teaching about German dialects can be a very insightful addition to any German class and is an important step in order to “overcoming the monocentric bias of one correct Standard German” (Ruck 2020: 17). Advanced language classes can lend themselves to

a more in-depth look at different dialects, but even beginning and intermediate classes can incorporate aspects of dialects and variants through movies or virtual exchanges with people from different German-speaking regions. Guest speakers who speak dialects can be another way to introduce students to the idea that the German language is more varied than they likely think. As one student noted on the post-survey: “This needs to be taught and emphasized more! Dialects and language variations are super cool and important.”

## Bibliography

- Abrams, Zsuzsanna., & Schiestl, Simone Berchtold (2017) Using authentic materials to teach varieties of German: Reflections on a pedagogical experiment. *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, 50 (2), 136-150.  
<https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/tger.12038>.
- Allison, Rebecca Lynch (2008). *German dialects in the world language classroom*. (Master of Arts). University of Colorado, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Ammon, Ulrich. (1995). *Die deutsche Sprache in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz: Das Problem der nationalen Varietäten*. de Gruyter.
- Baßler, Harald; Spiekermann, Helmut (2001) Dialekt und Standardsprache im DaF-Unterricht. Wie Schüler urteilen – wie Lehrer urteilen. *Linguistik Online* 9 (2).  
<https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.9.966>.
- Boss, Sabine (2014) *Der Goalie bin ich* [Swiss film].
- Costa, Antela. (2020). *Using escape rooms for language teaching*. Paper presented at the conference *Language and education during the COVID-19 – Pandemic – an international approach to new practices and adaptations*, Ekaterinburg.
- Feddersen, Richard (2024) In the margins: German language varieties in L2 German textbooks. *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, 11(2), 164-192.
- Feuz, Barbarba (2001) Dialektale Varietät als Fremdsprache unterrichten. Ein Erfahrungsbericht. *Linguistik Online*, 9(2). doi:<https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.9.970>
- Flüe-Fleck, Hans-Peter von; Hove, Ingrid (1994) Schweizerdeutsch: Ein Thema im Unterricht Deutsch als Fremdsprache? In Horys Breitung (Hrsg.), *Standpunkte zur Sprach- und Kulturvermittlung* (pp. 49-67): Goethe Institut.
- Jonge, Julie Stevens de; Labrador, Belen (2020) Fostering critical thinking and motivation through digital escape rooms: Preliminary observations. In Andreas Müller-Hartmann; Miriam Hauck (Hrsg.), *Virtual exchange and 21st century teacher education: Short papers from the 2019 EVALUATE conference* (pp. 157-164): research-publishing.net.
- Kehrein, R. (2020) Vertical Language Change in Germany: Dialects, Regiolects, and Standard German. In S. D. Brunn & R. Kehrein (eds.) *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map* (pp. 1357-1369). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Lam, Henry; O'Brien, Mary Grantham (2014) Perceptual dialectology in second language learners of German. *System*, 46, 151-162.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.08.006>.
- Lughofer, Johann Georg (2021) Dialekt im Fachsprachenunterricht. Überlegungen zu “Deutsch für Wirtschaft und Beruf” in Slowenien. *Scripta Manent*, XVI (2), 17-32.

- Meindl, Jörg (2016) Enriching the curriculum with Pennsylvania German. *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German*, 49 (1), 35-46.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/unteteacgerm.49.1.35>.
- Milojčić, Višnja (2023) Deconstructing the myth of Standard German: Navigating language ideologies in the L2 German university classroom. *Foreign Language Annals* 56 (2), 453-479. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12665>.
- Mudure-Iacob, Iona (2021) Gamified assessment of business English: Learning and testing business idioms and collocations via digital escape rooms. *Lingua. Language and Culture* 1, 76-90.
- Pheiff, Jeffrey; Pistor, Tillman; Wolanska, Anna (2019) Zur Verwendung der Forschungsplattform Regionalsprache.de (REDE) bei der Vermittlung arealer Sprachvariation in den Bereichen Deutsch als Fremdsprache und Deutsch als Zweitsprache. *Linguistik Online* 94 (1), 101-135. <https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.94.5435>.
- Prochaska, Andreas (2014) *Das finstere Tal*. [Austrian film].
- Ruck, Julia (2017) Against all standards: On regional variation in the German language classroom. *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 5 (1), 112-143.
- Ruck, Julia (2020) The politics and ideologies of pluricentric German in L2 teaching. *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 8 (1), 17-50.
- Schenker, Theresa; Kraemer, Angelika (2022) Digital escape rooms for world languages. *NECTFL Review* 89, 75-84.
- Schoonmaker-Gates, Elena (2017) Regional variation in the language classroom and beyond: Mapping learners' developing dialectal competence. *Foreign Language Annals* 50 (1), 177-194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12243>.
- Studer, Thomas (2002) Dialekte im DaF-Unterricht? Ja, aber... Konturen eines Konzepts für den Aufbau einer rezeptiven Varietätenkompetenz. *Linguistik Online*, 10(1), 113-131. <https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.10.927>.
- Thaler, Gerline (2023) Einbeziehen von sprachlicher Vielfalt oder Dialektliteratur im DaF-Unterricht. *Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik* 37 (2), 35-40.  
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BBGN2023-2-3>
- TheLanguageLineProgram (2021) Language Line. Retrieved from <https://languageprogram.com> (Letzter Zugriff 10.8.2024).
- van Kerckvoorde, Colette (2012) Adopting a pluricentric approach. *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 45 (2), 176-184.
- Wuensch, Juliane; Bolter, David (2020) Is a Schtoan a Stein? – How and why to teach dialects and regional variations in the German language classroom. *German as a Foreign Language* 2, 58-78.

## Biographical Information

Dr Theresa Schenker is the Language Program Director of German and Senior Lector II at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. Her research interests focus on the development of language skills and intercultural competence through telecollaboration and study abroad. She recently co-authored a book titled *From study abroad to education*



*abroad: Language proficiency, intercultural competence, and diversity* (Routledge, 2021). E-Mail: [theresa.schenker@yale.edu](mailto:theresa.schenker@yale.edu)

**Keywords**

Dialects – project-based learning – video conference – language learning

## APPENDIX

### SURVEY 1: Learning about German Dialects and Varieties

Q1 Interviewing a speaker of a German dialect/variety improved my understanding of German dialects and varieties.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q2 How much did you learn from the interview and other components of the final project about German dialects/varieties?

- ☐ A great deal
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ A moderate amount
- ☐ A little
- ☐ None at all

Q3 It is important to learn about German dialects and varieties in our German classes.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q4 Do you think German classes should focus more on teaching about German dialects and varieties? Why or why not?

Q5 Watching movies in German dialects/varieties helped me gain a better understanding of how these dialects/varieties work.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q7 I enjoyed learning about German dialects and varieties by having an interview with a speaker of this dialect for my final project.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q8 Overall, how would you evaluate the final project in which you explored a German dialect, interviewed a speaker, and analyzed the interview? How effective do you think it was in helping you learn about German dialects, improving your own German skills, and enjoying the learning experience? Are there ways in which the project could be improved?

Q9 Do you have any additional comments about learning about German dialects?

## **SURVEY 2: Learning about German Dialects with Senior Citizens**

Q1 I enjoyed video-chatting with senior citizens.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q2 What was the most enjoyable part of the experience?

Q3 Video-chatting with senior citizens helped me improve my German SPEAKING skills.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q4 Video-chatting with senior citizens helped me improve my German LISTENING skills.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q5 Video-chatting with senior citizens helped me learn more about German CULTURE.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q6 The number of video chats (3 throughout the semester) was

- ☐ adequate
- ☐ too much
- ☐ not enough

Q7 Video-chatting with senior citizens gave me a new perspective on Germany.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Please explain your response:

Q8 Video-chatting with senior citizens gave me a new perspective on the German language.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Please explain your response:

Q9 Video-chatting with senior citizens gave me a new perspective on German dialects.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Please explain your response:

Q10 How has your attitude toward learning German, learning about German culture, and toward individuals from Germany changed because of your participation in the exchange? Please be specific.

Q11 It is important to [be able to] communicate with speakers of different ages.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Please explain your response:

Q12 I would prefer chatting with Germans closer to my own age.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Please explain your response:

Q13 Did you encounter any problems with the exchange? If so, please explain.

Q14 I am a

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Q15 I have participated in other telecollaborative exchanges before.

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, 1
- ☐ Yes, more than 1

Q16 If Q15=yes: What format was/were the telecollaborative exchange(s)? Select all that apply.

- ☐ E-mail exchange
- ☐ Talk abroad
- ☐ Discussion Forum
- ☐ Photo Exchange (Cluster)
- ☐ Other: Please explain

Q17 Please leave any further comments about the exchange with senior citizens.