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German as a foreign language

Learner conversations as models of spoken language in second language German

Ulrike Bavendiek, Liverpool, Christian Jones, Liverpool

& Sandra Strigel, Manchester

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In this article we present the methodology and creation of an open-access online resource for students and teachers to help develop conversational skills in second language German. The materials were created as part of a project aimed at promoting and developing German conversational skills for learners in UK higher education contexts, an area which has often been neglected, despite its obvious importance. We will first describe the methodology. We took an applied linguistics approach to the materials in several ways. The materials were based on the specific requirements of UK HE learners; they feature the use of higher-level learners (and not L1 speakers) as models of conversational competence; they highlight the linguistic features of conversations which enable successful interaction; and they employ corpus linguistics methods to demonstrate high frequency features of conversation. Following this, we will move on to discuss some of the theoretical challenges we faced and how we sought to address them from both a practical and theoretical stance.

1. Introduction

Languages are learned in linguistically diverse spaces. In class, dialects[1] of the learners' and teachers' first languages and of the target language are all part of the diverse linguistic repertoire they may draw on. In an inclusive learning environment, these varieties are seen not as deficient ones that divert from the model of an imagined ideal standard, but as autonomous and patterned linguistic sub-systems of a language. While the pluricentric status of German is increasingly recognised in learning materials, and the three German standard varieties are often represented, this is not usually the case for non-standard varieties (Shafer 2018).

In the materials presented in this article we go a step further, including second language learner varieties, or interlanguages, as models of spoken German. An interlanguage is 'the language produced by the adult learner' which forms 'a separate transitional linguistic system that can be described in terms of evolving linguistic patterns and rules' (Tarone

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[1] 'The term *dialect* is generally used to refer to a variety of a language associated with a regionally or socially defined group of people. ... The term *dialect* used this way is neutral – no evaluation is implied, either positive or negative.' (Adger 2007: 1)

2020: 595). By definition the learner's proficiency increases as the internalised inter-language system evolves towards closer approximation to the target language, here the language of more competent language users.

Inviting second language learners to engage in spontaneous, unscripted conversation is not unusual in the teaching of German. However, in the materials discussed here we used such output as models of spoken German, which we recorded, transcribed and pedagogically prepared for independent learners. Recognising the specific features of conversations as opposed to written language, our focus was on the development of speaking skills, drawing the learners' attention to features of spoken language. Examples from the *Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch* (FOLK – Research and teaching Corpus of Spoken German) (IDS 2024) were included to illustrate the use of the selected conversational features by other German speakers.

Our approach using language learners as models and recognising conversational features is, we believe, innovative. In the following sections we will explain the rationale behind the decision to use unscripted dialogues, describe the materials, and finally discuss some of the advantages and challenges of the approach.

2. Literature review

An authentic text (written or spoken) can be broadly defined as 'a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message' (Morrow 1977: 13). We could add that in second language teaching, this tends to mean texts which have not been specifically designed for language teaching purposes and might include examples such as songs, restaurant menus or social media posts (Jones 2022). There have been a number of arguments for the use of such authentic materials, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), since the advent of communicative approaches (e.g. Brumfit and Johnson 1979). These arguments have included the notion that such materials can be more motivating for learners, contain more useful and realistic language input and in general help learners better prepare for language use in the world beyond the classroom. Although limited, there have also been studies which have compared the effects of authentic material over time and found them to be significantly more effective on a range of tests (e.g. Gilmore 2011).

At the same time, many authentic materials need some kind of mediation or adaption in order to be accessible and thus useful to learners of different levels. This might mean we

edit the length of texts, add visual support to assist learners with meaning or pre-teach vocabulary before we tackle a text, for example. Discussing this in relation to the use of transcripts from a spoken corpus, McCarthy & McCarten (2018: 23) suggest that what is important is that such texts are still authentic to the learner and their experience suggesting they should 'recognise them as realistic and thus authenticate them'. In other words, what is essential in the use of such materials is that even if adapted, they feel realistic to the learners rather than contrived and unrealistic. McCarthy & McCarten (2018) suggest that one way we can produce materials with realistic texts is by adapting samples from a spoken corpus. Such data will contain typical features of spoken language such as hesitation, discourse marking, vague language and showing listenership. They suggest that corpus samples can be edited (for instance, made shorter) and still provide realistic models of conversation we can use to illustrate different features of spoken language. These can be organised into a syllabus for developing conversation skills by linking frequent spoken language we find in a corpus to specific conversation strategies: managing the conversation (e.g. *anyway, better go*), managing your turn (e.g. *I mean*), showing listenership (e.g. *that's interesting*) and taking account of others (e.g. *I like jazz and things like that*) (McCarthy & McCarten 2018: 14). In German an example of each strategy could be as follows: managing the conversation (e.g. *also, jedenfalls, wie dem auch sei*), managing your turn (e.g. *also*), showing listenership (e.g. *ja*), and taking account of others (e.g. *und so*). This approach is one which has some efficacy (Jones 2021) and offers a means in which teachers could incorporate authentic spoken corpus data into materials.

Sadly, in the case of conversations, it is not difficult to find published examples based on scripted dialogues, often spoken by voice actors, which hence can appear very contrived in comparison to corpus recordings. Most teachers will have come across such examples.

There are often pedagogic reasons why contrived dialogues are employed, normally because the desire to illustrate certain language points takes precedence over the realism of the conversation. Yet in doing so, such conversations create a model of conversation where speakers never hesitate, there are no problems in understanding each other and typical conversational language only rarely appears. This issue is one which exists across many second languages and is nothing new (McCarthy & Carter 1993).

Another aspect which can help learners to authenticate the conversational models they are given is included in the topics and types of conversations. If these align with the

interests of learners, matching the kind of conversations they wish to have, logically they are more likely to be considered useful, serving the needs of the learners. The importance of this is illustrated by Siegel (2014), who investigated the alignment of textbook topics with the actual conversations of international students on a university campus in Japan. Her findings show that in some cases the topics did not align. One example was that textbooks tended to have general topics about free time, while the conversations students actually had focused on the local context such as doing a particular sport at the university. She recommends that topics relate much more closely to the localised, real-world needs of learners.

Our approach in creating our materials was influenced by McCarthy & McCarten (2018) and Siegel (2014). We sought to create model conversation texts which learners in our context could authenticate as realistic texts and thus feel more motivated to learn from, something particularly important in UK Higher Education, where enrolment for German as a second language has been declining. The approach (detailed further in the next section) was to first find out the most common types and topics our learners wished to talk about at each level. Following this, we employed successful speakers of German (students at higher levels of competency) to record spontaneous texts about these conversation topics/types. These conversations were then transcribed and spoken features used were examined in a spoken corpus of L1 speakers. These features were then linked to McCarthy & McCarten's (2018) categories of conversation strategies and samples of the L1 speaker corpus were also used as a point of comparison.

There were several reasons why we made the decision to use successful L2 speakers and not L1 speakers of German or to work directly from a spoken corpus. Firstly, we felt that successful L2 speakers at higher levels could provide a model which would seem more realistic and attainable than a model produced by L1 speakers, especially for speakers at lower levels, an argument which has also been made in relation to English as second language (Jones et al. 2018). We are not arguing that an L1 speaker model is never suitable or attainable for learners, and indeed there are many such models available in materials. Rather, we are putting this forward as alternative, given the importance, as previously stated, that learners can authenticate materials if they see them as realistic.

Secondly, sourcing model texts from a corpus which exactly matched the topics and types of conversations our learners wished to have would have been impossible.

Thirdly, in order to build the confidence of our learners and their willingness to engage with the German language, we chose to use second language learners as models of spoken German in line with recent motivational theories. According to Expectancy-Value theories, expectancy of success is one of two crucial factors of motivation, alongside the value that success in the task has for the learner. "It is unlikely that effort will be invested in a task […] if the individual is convinced that he or she cannot succeed no matter how hard he or she tries" (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021: 18). Using L1 speaker dialogues for language production tasks can consequently be seen as a potentially demotivating feature in learning materials, because learners cannot realistically expect themselves to use such varieties.

Dörnyei (2005: 105) approaches the issue from a different angle, defining the 'Ideal L2 Self' as a strong motivating factor in his theory 'the Motivational Self System', which is associated with Gardner's (1985) construct of the integrative motive. According to Dörnyei, if a learner visualises their ideal self as a competent L2 speaker, they will strive to become that person. We argue that it is likely to be easier for a speaker to visualise themself as a proficient L2 speaker of the language than as an L1 speaker, especially if given a model of other successful L2 speakers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection and analysis: Identifying learners' conversational interests

The materials presented here were created as part of a *British Academy* funded project aimed at developing a set of motivational open-access language learning materials authentic to learners of German in the UK[2]. As outlined above, we were keen to develop materials that would take students' conversational interests into account to ensure the conversational models would be considered realistic and useful by the learners. After gaining ethical clearance from the University of Liverpool, the first step in the project therefore was to identify the topics learners of German wanted to have conversations about in the target language. To this end, we designed a questionnaire that contained questions on biographical data as well as on the modules the students were studying, in order to establish their CEFR levels. A list of general conversation topics was provided, and students were asked to indicate their interests by ticking their three preferred

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[2] Grant TDA21/210031 *Learner conversations as models of spoken language in second language German*.

conversation topics. A free text option ('other') was included to allow the addition of up to three topics in case participants' interests were not represented in the list. The questionnaire further contained an open question in which the respondents were asked to describe what type of conversation they would like to have in relation to each topic they had chosen from the list (for example: "*Topic: sport – Type of conversation: I would like to have a conversation about the sport I play in my free time*"). The questionnaire concluded with an open question which allowed respondents to add any further comments they might have.

All learners of German at the University of Liverpool who were either enrolled on the undergraduate degree course or on the institution-wide language programme (IWLP) were invited to take part in the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was administered both face-to-face during class time and online through an email link, in case students had missed a class or they were currently on their year abroad. Participation was voluntary; students were provided with information about the aims of the study as well as how their data would be stored so that informed consent could be given. Altogether, 107 students were eligible to take part in the study and we collected 60 questionnaire responses; 75 % of these were completed face-to-face, 25% online.

The data was collated in an Excel spreadsheet and initial checks conducted to identify any problematic cases. For instance, some respondents had ticked/listed more than three preferred conversation topics. In such cases, the topics chosen were compared to the three descriptions provided further down in the questionnaire, where participants detailed the specific types of conversations they would like to have about a topic. Any topic indicated on the list that was not further described in this section was discounted, so that for each participant three topics could be identified. One respondent commented that they were not interested in conversational German but had taken the IWLP module to only improve their reading skills. This questionnaire was thus discounted, leaving us with 59 valid questionnaires for analysis. Based on Clark et al. (2021: 182), this constituted an overall response rate of 55.7 % (the response rate for students enrolled in on campus modules was 59.8%, the response rate for students on their year abroad was 26.7%).

As is often common in survey research, the face-to-face data collection generated more interest in the study than the electronic data collection (Denscombe 2021: 60) and to some extent the response rate reflects student attendance as the vast majority of students who were present in class during the data collection volunteered to participate in the survey.

To reach students who were absent on the day of the data collection or who were on their year abroad, reminders to complete the online questionnaire were sent out by email. Considering that response rates can be particularly low for surveys administered online (ibid.) and that 'survey fatigue' amongst students has been reported (e.g. Porter et al. 2004), the overall response rate of 55.7% can be considered good.

In the next step of the data analysis, the respondents were grouped according to their CEFR levels (A1 to C1):

CEFR Level	Number of respondents	percent
A1	8	13.6%
A2	10	16.9%
B1	7	11.9%
B2	24	40.7%
C1	10	16.9%
Total	59	100.0%

Table 1: Number of respondents across CEFR levels

For each level as well as for the respondents overall, the favourite three conversation topics were identified by counting the preferred topics indicated/listed in the question-naire. To analyse the specific types of conversations respondents wished to have about each topic, the respondents' comments were coded according to themes. Depending on the nature of the comment and the level of detail, some respondents' comments were assigned to one, others to several themes. For example, relating to the topic 'Food and drink' the comment "What I enjoy re. food and drink. Where I go to eat excellent food and drink. What I don't like about food/cooking programme" was coded for three different themes: (1) favourite food/choices and foods I enjoy; (2) places to eat/drink; (3) cooking/recipes – incl. cooking programmes.

This analysis allowed a collation of most popular topics and conversation types for each language level as well as for the group overall. For levels A1-B2, the top three frequent topics and conversation themes were then chosen to be the focus of the materials creation. In case topics/themes were tied for one level, the results were compared to the preferences of the overall group and the more popular topic/theme chosen. Although most of the topics chosen by the learners are covered in textbooks for more advanced levels, it was interesting to see that the learners wanted topics such as History or Politics to be included

at A1 and A2 level as well. The final preferred topic list per level is outlined in table 2 below.

Level	Topic	Theme
A1	Food and Drink	Ordering/eating/drinking in a restaurant (incl. dietary requirements)
	History	General German history (incl. German speaking countries)
	Leisure time	General: what people do/enjoy doing in their free time
A2	Politics	Current affairs/trends in politics (German speaking countries and Europe specifically)
	Music	Favourite/popular music; what people enjoy listening to
	History	General German history (incl. German speaking countries)
B1	Environment	Protecting the environment and solutions to environmental issues (general and Germany specific)
	Politics	News and current affairs (general/globally)
	Film	Favourite/popular films
B2	Politics	Current affairs/trends (German speaking countries and Europe specifically)
	Film	German films (incl. European cinema)
	Food and Drink	Ordering/eating/drinking in a restaurant (incl. dietary requirements)
C1	Food and Drink	Food culture: traditional food in Germany and elsewhere
	TV	Popular TV (general, incl. recommendations)
	Family	My and others' family (incl. family structures/relationships)

Table 2: Preferred topics and themes per CEFR level

3.2 Recording the Learner Conversations

Once the conversation topics had been identified for the different levels, the next step was to record higher level learners of German having conversations about these topics. To that end, we recruited students from the final-year degree programme as well as a speaker from outside the university (C1 level) who volunteered to undertake the recordings in pairs. The participants were rewarded with a £10 voucher for each conversation they recorded. For the lower-level conversations (A1/A2), we also trialed conversations with intermediate level learners but eventually did not include these recordings in the materials as they contained too many inaccuracies, as discussed under 4.2.

The recordings were conducted in the university's recording studio to ensure the audio material would be of suitable quality. For each topic the participants were provided with

prompt cards that contained brief task instructions. These instructions were designed to give the task a clear purpose and outcome, rather than simply asking participants to 'talk about X or Y'. For example, at B1 level, in relation to the topic of politics and current affairs, both students were given the same prompt:

> A and B. Find out what your partner thinks about Brexit and how Germans view it. Decide on three things you agree about in relation to this topic.

3.3 Designing the materials

Once the recordings were complete, the next step was to produce verbatim transcripts of the recorded learner conversations. These transcripts were then scrutinised for useful phrases relating to each topic as well as for interesting conversational features (e.g. use of vague language, signaling listenership, use of discourse markers). The selected conversational features were then organized as they related to the specific conversation strategies mentioned above. These were either managing the conversation (e.g. *also, jedenfalls, wie dem auch sei*), managing your turn (e.g. *also*), showing listenership (e.g. *ja*) and taking account of others (e.g. *und so*), based on categories provided by McCarthy & McCarten (2018: 14). These strategies and the language used were then also compared to the FOLK corpus to see how such features are used by speakers in German-speaking countries and to find examples for illustration and exploration that would then also feature in the open-access materials. The FOLK corpus contains a collection of approximately 300 hours of audio and video recordings (ca. 3 million transcribed tokens) of spoken German (IDS 2024); it is part of the Archive of Spoken German that is maintained by the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache Mannheim (IDS).

Having identified what phrases and conversational features to focus on in each learner conversation, a template was then created to allow the research team to work collaboratively on the creation of the materials. In the interest of user-friendliness and consistency, each template / set of materials followed a similar layout and included the following elements: a cover page, instructions how to navigate the materials, a reflection question as initial stimulus, the presentation of the learner conversation (audio and transcript) with interactive (multiple choice) questions, language focus 1 (useful topical phrases), language focus 2 (selected conversational features), illustration of the conversational features using examples from the FOLK corpus, a quiz to recap the learning, and a concluding reflection task inviting learners to consider how they could use their newly gained knowledge in future conversations. To engage learners, check under-

standing and add an element of fun, the various elements were supported with interactive tasks (e.g. drag and drop exercises, multiple choice). As digital games can enhance motivation in language learning (e.g. Gabriel 2023; Rasti-Behbahani 2021) we also added elements of gamification, such as a mini-quiz and memory-style game at the end of each set of the materials.

The completed templates were then digitised using H5P, a content creation tool for the design of interactive online resources (www.h5p.org). In the digitisation process we were guided by the Centre for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Liverpool, which offered us practical help and support as part of a wider pilot project aimed at exploring the use of H5P at the university (for further information on the pilot project see CIE 2024a, 2024b). We were further assisted by a student who had previous experience of working with the CIE on the H5P pilot project and who provided technical and design expertise and helped with the digitisation of the materials.

Once the first set of materials was created, we sought feedback on the user-friendliness of the materials from CIE and language teaching colleagues as well as from one of the student participants. Refinements were put in place based on the feedback before the remaining materials were finalised. Eventually, the materials were published with open access on the University of Liverpool's VLE. The materials can be accessed using this link: EL-LANGCONVPROJECT - Learner conversations as models of spoken language in second language German (liverpool.ac.uk).

The next phase of the project which aims at investigating the effectiveness of the materials through the use of learner diaries is currently underway.

4. Discussion

Our aim was to offer a sustainable open-access online resource with activities that respond directly to the conversational needs of the learners. Focussing on the authenticity of the materials for the learners, we decided to a) ask learners about their conversational needs and address their expressed preferences regarding the topics of conversations in the materials, b) use unscripted conversations of learners of a higher proficiency level to provide the input material, c) focus on the unique conversational features and rules in the activities and d) analyse the conversations using corpus linguistics techniques. Awareness of specific conversational language, which is markedly different from the language used

in written or scripted texts, is acknowledged as an important first step in the learner's development as a confident speaker of the target language.

In the following discussion we will address challenges that we encountered in the creation of the online materials and offer ways to deal with them.

4.1 Addressing the conversational needs of the learners

Starting with the survey on the learners' conversational interests, we noticed that some of the topics and types of conversations the students wanted to master were not necessarily in line with the topics usually taught at the levels we were aiming at. For example, History and Politics were named as popular topics at A1 and A2 levels, a choice that reflected the specific interests of HE learners who took German in combination with other degree subjects or pursued specific research interests. Although discussing History or Politics at A1 or A2 level was likely to be difficult, we decided to address the expressed interests of the learners in the material by using conversations around their chosen topics. We then provided appropriate support and careful scaffolding through transcripts and level-specific exercises and vocabulary, which were designed to prepare the learners for the tasks, draw their attention to selected phrases and structures, and finally to explain and reinforce some conversational features from the input. As a result, when the conversations were challenging for the targeted learners in terms of the vocabulary and structures used, we created activities to decode and learn from them in line with the target proficiency level. We also decided to add 'i-buttons', – a pop up feature available in H5P that provides additional information on demand – which allowed users, when necessary, to access English translations of instructions quickly, to not become distracted by comprehension difficulties and therefore keep the focus on the conversational features as the key learning points of the materials. Providing the necessary facilitation around challenging topics should enable the learners to engage in conversations that are relevant to them.

4.2 Using learner conversations as input

As explained previously, we based the materials on non-scripted, prompted conversations held by more competent learners. The recorded conversations posed two challenges for us. First, the resulting models of spoken German were ungraded in terms of CEFR level, since the speakers drew on their full German repertoire, including structures and vocabulary that learners at a lower proficiency level will not be familiar with. We decided to

address the problem by providing transcripts for all model conversations, to enable the learners to follow up on sections they find difficult to understand.

Second, the recorded conversations contained mistakes and errors. Since the distinction is irrelevant in the context of the discussion, we will simply call all deviations from a taught norm 'mistakes'. As explained in the literature review, tolerance towards deviations from the norm is part of our understanding of interlanguage and linguistic diversity. In addition, we considered acceptance of the models of spoken German provided by our volunteers as part of our ethical conduct towards them, especially since many learners still 'treat errors as a sign of failure' (Bargiel-Matusiewicz & Bargiel-Firlit 2009: 45). However, the fact that we used the recorded conversations as models of spoken German for learners of lower proficiency levels meant that we didn't want to let the mistakes go unnoticed, especially since we decided to transcribe the conversations. Considering the impact that mistakes can have on other learners, who in this case are expected to engage closely with the conversations, we decided to manage mistakes by underlining inaccuracies in the verbatim transcripts and providing a second transcript alongside the first as an amended model, in which the underlined passages were corrected. No explicit explanations were given for the recasts in the corrected versions of the conversations. This helped us keep the focus firmly on conversational features as the main learning objectives. While the correction of grammatical and lexico-semantic mistakes was relatively straightforward, pragmatic and content-related mistakes were more difficult to deal with. In a few cases we decided to not use a recorded conversation because of factual mistakes.

Ultimately, it was hoped that drawing attention away from minor mistakes that do not impact on the message, or the conversational flow should help build the confidence of the learners as German speakers. Learning to accept mistakes as a natural and integral part of even a competent learner's interlanguage is an important learning outcome. As Chakowa (2018: 10) explains: "it is worth noting that real-life forums are far from mistake free, and that it is probably more important to be understood in a spontaneous manner than to be linguistically perfect".

4.3 Analysing the conversation using corpus linguistics techniques

One of the features of the materials is the inclusion of examples from the FOLK corpus (IDS 2024) to illustrate the use of relevant conversational features by speakers in German

speaking countries. The FOLK corpus contains samples of spoken German in interaction and its contents can be accessed for the purpose of teaching and research. The Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS) kindly gave us permission to include extracts from the FOLK transcripts in the open access materials. The inclusion of corpus material in language teaching is a practice more widely spread in English than in German-language teaching, yet it can be a means to raise awareness and noticing of conversational features (Caines et al. 2016; Jones & Oakey 2024; McCarthy & Carter 1995). However, the practical side of identifying examples from the corpus and incorporating them into the materials was challenging. This was partly because we were quite restricted in the choice of extracts we could reasonably include: Not only did the corpus extracts have to physically fit in the space available on the H5P template (i.e. long conversation snippets were deemed too complex/straining for the user), but they also needed to be comprehensible by learners without much contextual information and without the support of audio material. This meant that at times we included examples that might be somewhat challenging for the level of the learners (particularly at A1/A2 levels), but we tried to accommodate this by reducing the difficulty of the interactive task used to support the FOLK extract. Often, the tasks which required learners to work with the corpus were therefore related to simple identification of form/function mapping in the samples from the corpus, such as identifying whether 'ja' was being used by speakers to signal listenership or answer a real question:

Image 1 Extract from the open access materials – A1: Leisure time (accessible via this link: https://canvas.liverpool.ac.uk/courses/63799/pages/a1-freizeit)

5. Conclusion and outlook

Spoken language is markedly different from written language. It often diverts from the written model that is often used in textbooks and materials designed for second language learning. Conversations are centred on interaction and speakers use markers to organise the conversation, turns are negotiated, interest, surprise, understanding or lack of understanding is shown, and clarifications are provided. There can be misunderstandings, false starts, hesitations and due to real-time processing, mistakes are made by all speakers. Changing learner attitudes regarding 'mistakes' in conversations by focusing their attention on successful conversations rather than grammatical accuracy is an intended learning outcome of the materials.

The practice material presented here is designed to emphasise and practice the specific features of conversations in learner conversations that they themselves told us they wished to have. Using unscripted spoken language produced by foreign language learners as models for less competent speakers, we have placed the focus on successful interaction and tried to show learners some of the linguistic and discourse features of this interaction. Acknowledging the diverse varieties used in conversations rather than adhering to a perceived standard norm, and using models that can easily be authenticated by the learners, sets the material apart from more traditional textbooks and activities. We have presented here the innovative and creative decisions we made producing the materials, often diverting from more traditional approaches evident in most texts used for language teaching. We hope that the critical discussion of the challenges we encountered will help material designers, teachers and other practitioners develop their own ways of teaching conversation skills with ease and confidence.

It remains to be seen how the learners use and evaluate the practice material. A study gathering feedback from learners is currently underway and the results will be published in due course.

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Biographical Information

Ulrike Bavendiek is senior lecturer in German Studies and Applied Linguistics in the Department of Languages, Cultures and Film at the University of Liverpool, UK. Her research interests include learner motivation, independence and linguistic variation in language teaching and learning, often with a focus on beginners' language learning. Her most recent publications are on Individual Differences, and a co-edited volume and special issue on ab-initio language learning.

Christian Jones is a reader in TESOL and Applied Linguistics in the Department of English at the University of Liverpool, UK. His main research interests are connected to spoken language and he has published research related to this area examining spoken corpora, lexis, lexico-grammar, and instructed second language acquisition.

Sandra Strigel is a language tutor for German in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures at the University of Manchester and works as an Associate Lecturer for the Open University. She has an interdisciplinary background in English as a Foreign Language and German teaching and a research interest in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), teacher cognition and teacher development, and in digital technologies for language learning.

Keywords

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