



**“The conversations themselves were definitely
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corpus-informed conversation materials in L2 German**

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“The conversations themselves were definitely helpful.” Learner perceptions of learner-led and corpus-informed conversation materials in L2 German

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One barrier which learners face in a foreign language context is access to models of conversations matching their needs and showing the realities of conversational discourse. The current study focuses on the perceptions of learners after using learner-led and corpus-informed self-access conversation materials designed for students of German in UK higher education. The materials were developed based on the kinds of conversations learners themselves suggested they wished to have. They feature the use of higher-level learners as models of conversational competence and highlight frequent linguistic features of conversations which enable successful interaction. In this sense, we define them as ‘learner-led’. They also employ corpus linguistic methods to demonstrate high frequency features of conversation, including reference to spoken corpora of German. In this sense they are ‘corpus-informed’. Results show the positive perception that these materials help with conversational difficulties the learners reported, and that they help them notice some of the spoken language in conversations after studying them, that they could help them notice gaps in their own conversational language, and that learners could envisage using some of the language in future. The less positive perceptions centred around some aspects of the materials design.

1. Introduction

To be effective, a crucial aspect of the conversational models learners are given is that they match the type of conversations they wish to have, in terms of topics and types of conversations. The more these align with the things which learners want and need to talk about, the more likely they are to motivate learners to use them. Research which explores the conversational models which learners are provided with (e.g. Siegel 2014), shows that textbook conversation topics do not always align with these needs and wants. We may, for example, model people speaking about their free time when learners do not really do this themselves. Similarly, arguments have been made that to be motivating and effective, conversational models should be perceived as realistic and attainable by learners: In the context of English as a second language, Jones et al. (2018) suggest this can include language learners of higher competence as they could potentially be perceived as realistic and authentic models for lower-level learners. Yet, the perception of materials that include such ‘learner-led’ conversational models has yet to be explored in the context of German as a foreign language teaching.

In addition to the needs of learners, spoken corpus linguistics research has provided a clear picture of linguistic and discourse features of conversational language. We know that linguistic features such as spoken discourse markers, vague language and response tokens are frequent in conversational discourse in languages including English (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 2006), German (e.g. König 2021) and Spanish (e.g. Fernandez 2013). We also know that discourse features such as repetition, co-construction of turns and unfinished utterances are a common feature of conversations (e.g. Rieger 2003). These corpus findings have begun to be used to inform second language teaching materials (e.g. McCarthy and McCarten 2018). However, there are only limited studies which examine learner perceptions of such materials (e.g. Timmis 2005, Jones and Oakey 2024). Exploring learner perception is key to understanding how learners themselves feel about the benefits/usefulness of such materials in relation to improving their conversational skills.

This article reports on a study which attempts to address the two gaps identified: the need to evaluate learner perceptions of conversational models based on learner language and the use of spoken corpora to inform such material. In this study we focus on a set of materials created based on the topics and types of conversations learners in a UK Higher Education (HE) want to have. The UK HE context was chosen because in recent years, there has been a decline in enrolments in degree-level German Studies programmes as shown in HESA table 52 (HESA 2025), despite German being the most sought-after language by UK employers (Jones 2019). One possible means of addressing this is to use more learner-centred materials, focusing on the needs and wants of learners themselves, informed by language which corpora show us is highly frequent. Such material has the potential to motivate and engage current and future students. The materials in this study include higher-level learners as conversational models and also make reference to a spoken corpus to inform their focus. Further details regarding the materials design can be found in Bavendiek, Jones and Strigel (2025).

This study explores the perceptions of learners in regard to how these materials help with their difficulties in conversations, what they notice from the materials and what features of the language they feel they can use themselves in their own conversations. We use the self-reports of learners in oral diaries over a six-week period and focus group interviews

before and after using the materials. In doing so, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What difficulties do learners report when having conversations in L2 German?
2. To what extent do learners perceive that the learner-led and corpus-informed materials helped with the reported difficulties?
3. To what extent do learners perceive that the learner-led and corpus-informed materials helped them to notice or use common linguistic features of spoken German in L2 German conversations?

2. Literature review

In German, as with many other languages, spoken corpus research has shown that a number of features are common in speech. These include vague language (e.g. *und so*, Cutting 2015), response tokens (e.g. *ja*, Golato and Fagyal 2008) and discourse markers (e.g. *ehm*, König 2021). Spoken corpora allow us to better understand how frequent particular items are in conversation and also how they function in discourse. To take one example, a search in the German Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch (FOLK – Research and teaching Corpus of Spoken German) (IDS 2024) shows us that *ja* is the fourth most common word and is a highly frequent response token. Researchers such as Golato and Fagyal (2008) have explored the different pragmatic uses of *ja* and *jaja* as conversational responses in German. They suggest, for example, that a single *ja* can either acknowledge the other speaker, confirm understanding or encourage the speaker to continue.

The new understanding of spoken language is slowly starting to be reflected in teaching materials for German. While producers of online sources can react flexibly and quickly on new research in conversational German, and many, such as Easy German (<https://www.easygerman.org/>) offer language learning materials based on authentic, spontaneous conversations, conversations in textbooks and edited language learning and assessment materials tend to be more contrived. Concu (2020) identifies common features of authentic spoken German and then continues to compare extracts from audio texts produced for the teaching of German as a Foreign Language with recordings of authentic speech from databases. She finds that markers of spoken German, such as discourse markers, are less frequently used in German teaching materials when compared to files from the databases.

Corpora can provide the necessary data and models for authentic German spoken texts. Corpora of authentic texts have been used for a long time to inform the teaching of German as a Foreign Language, as the overview by Flinz et al. (2021) shows. In the context of German Studies in the US, Vyatkina (2024) investigated a pedagogical framework that includes a corpus-informed component in open access materials designed for a HE German as a Foreign Language Course. Having designed, implemented and evaluated the new approach, she concludes that students found the materials with the integrated corpus useful and spent time on them especially for their independent learning.

The findings from corpus research have also resulted in studies which have sought to investigate how some of these aspects of conversational language might be viewed by teachers themselves. Cutting (2015), for example, examined the beliefs of 178 German English language teachers and students in regard to vague language such as *und so*. Results show that participants had a good awareness of the use of vague language in German and suggested that vagueness is best used with family and friends and not in more formal settings. There was a perception that vagueness could be a mark of “lazy” language, being uneducated or reserved for young people. This type of study is useful because it demonstrates that simply telling learners or teachers that an area of spoken language is frequent alone may not be enough to convince them to teach or learn it. More recently, Uskokovic and Schirm (2024) report on trialling a rubric aimed at helping teachers of L2 German to assess interactional competence via use of response tokens such as *ach so* or *echt*. Findings show that teachers generally viewed the rubric positively but that there was a need for better understanding of the function of response tokens in interaction. Jones (2021) examined corpus-informed materials through a series of studies on conversation strategies in English as a second or foreign language. Conversation strategies are defined by functional labels which McCarthy and McCarten (2018) provided for the way speakers use various items of lexis and spoken grammar in conversation. The label *listenership*, for example, is used to describe the way speakers employ response tokens such as *ja*. Findings show that corpus-informed materials are viewed as potentially useful by teachers, instruction produced a significant short-term effect on learners in the experimental group, and learners also reported noticing the language taught in conversations they had outside of class.

It is important to take the potentially low acceptance of non-standard or conversational ‘lazy’ language amongst teachers and students into account. Corpora can help convince them that such forms are useful for language learners since they reflect actual language use.

There have also been a limited number of studies in relation to student perception of materials in different second language contexts.

Liu et al. (2024) examined informal digital learning by Chinese learners of French and German at universities. Surveying over eight hundred participants, their findings show that promotion-focused motivation (to achieve goals and positive outcomes), enjoyment, and self-efficacy can significantly influence how much learners engage with informal digital language learning. These findings suggest that any use of corpus-informed materials needs to be perceived as manageable by learners and led by their needs: helping them to achieve their goals and being interesting and enjoyable.

Finally, a similar argument with regards to materials being considered realistic, interesting and led by learners’ needs has been made by Jones et al. (2018) with regards to conversational models. In the context of English as a second language learning, they suggest that successful language learners of higher competence can provide a potentially more attainable conversational model than native speakers, particularly for speakers at lower levels. Despite this, the use and perception of such learner-led models in the context of German as a foreign language teaching remains to be explored.

What is often lacking from the studies mentioned can be focused on two main areas. Firstly, there are only a small number of studies (e.g. Liu et al. 2024), which seek to better understand perceptions of materials from the viewpoint of L2 German learners. This is important as understanding how learners perceive materials as helping (or not) with difficulties they have is a useful measure of their potential effectiveness. If learners do not perceive them as helpful, it is unlikely they will continue using them and as the materials in this study are learner-led (using topics which learners wish to talk about and higher-level learners as conversational models) this seems particularly important. Secondly, there are also only a limited number of studies (e.g. Vyatkina 2024) which have sought to investigate learner perceptions of corpus-informed materials.

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials design

The materials used in this study were developed as an open-access language learning resource with the goal of developing conversation skills for learners of L2 German in a UK Higher Education context (see Bavendiek, Jones and Strigel 2025). The materials were designed based on a four-stage process. Firstly, all learners of German at one UK university were surveyed and they identified the topics of conversations they most wanted to have in German. They were then asked to indicate the type of conversation they wished to have in relation to that topic. Following this, the three most favored conversation topics and types were identified for each level (CEFR A1-B2, Council of Europe 2020). An example of this (taken from the materials) is shown in Figure 1.

To access the materials, click on the following buttons:



Figure 1: For each level (A1-B2), the most favored conversation topics and types were identified and three sets of materials created.

Once the topics and types of conversations were decided, higher level (CEFR C1 level) learners of German were recruited to record conversations matching the types and topics chosen. They were given instructions to give the task a clear purpose and outcome. One example, at B1 level, in relation to the topic of politics and current affairs, was as follows:

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.

Although the C1 level learners were given a few minutes to read the task prompt, conversations were not scripted or rehearsed. Finally, the recordings were transcribed and the materials designed using each recording as a model conversation, with accompanying tasks such as comprehension. Figure 2 shows an example of this from B1 level.

LEARNER CONVERSATIONS

Hörübung: Richtig oder falsch?

Hören Sie das Gespräch. Die Sprecherinnen, Helen und Sophie, waren aufgefordert herauszufinden, was ihre Gesprächspartnerin über den Brexit denkt, was Deutsche darüber denken und in drei Punkten, die mit dem Thema zusammenhängen, übereinzustimmen.

Entscheiden Sie, ob die folgenden Aussagen richtig oder falsch sind.

Nachdem Sie das Gespräch angehört haben, können Sie das [Transkript](#) zu Hilfe nehmen.

If you would like to see an English translation of the statements, click here.

0:00 / 4:25

Sophie und Helen haben beide einen Migrationshintergrund.

☐ Richtig
☐ Falsch

Überprüfen

Sie sind beide gegen den Brexit.

☐ Richtig
☐ Falsch

Überprüfen

Figure 2: The materials were based on the recorded learner conversations; comprehension tasks accompanied the recordings (example taken from material set B1 – Politik).

To inform the materials creation, we examined transcripts for useful phrases relating to each topic as well as for common conversational features (e.g. use of vague language) which corpus linguistics research has shown are very frequent in conversation. Based on ideas from McCarthy and McCarten (2018: 14), conversational features were then organized into four types of conversation strategy: managing the conversation (e.g. also, jedenfalls, wie dem auch sei), managing turns (e.g. also), showing listenership (e.g. ja) and taking account of others (e.g. und so). We also made comparisons to the FOLK corpus of spoken German to show how such features are used by speakers in German-speaking countries. The FOLK corpus contains approximately 3 million tokens of spoken German (IDS 2024). Specific activities, such as asking learners to identify different functions of the response token *ja* from corpus examples, were also designed to help raise learners' awareness of such features. Figures 3a, 3b and 4 from A1 show an example of this.

Sprachfokus 2: Gesprächsstrategie - Aktives Zuhören signalisieren

Im Gespräch zeigen Sprecher*innen oft, dass sie ihre Gesprächspartner*innen verstehen und dass sie Interesse am Gespräch haben. Zum Beispiel reagieren sie oder stellen Fragen. Das soll signalisieren, dass sie aktiv zuhören (signalling listenership).

Wie zeigen Sie Ihren Gesprächspartner*innen auf **Englisch**, dass Sie zuhören? Wie zeigen Sie Interesse? Lesen Sie nun weiter und schauen Sie, wie Tina und Ben das auf **Deutsch** machen.




Tina und Ben zeigen, dass sie aktiv zuhören:

1. Verstehen signalisieren

- ach so
- ah
- also ja
- genau
- ich verstehe
- ja / ja ja
- mhm
- natürlich
- schön / sehr schön

2. Interesse zeigen

- ach so?
- echt?
- Das ist eine interessante Frage.



Figure 3a: The materials include evidence how conversational strategies were used in the learner conversations; here: signalling active listenership (example taken from A1 – Freizeit); learners are asked to identify the strategies in selected extracts from the transcript (see figure 3b – below)

Ben und Tina zeigen, dass sie aktiv zuhören. Was sagen sie?

Wählen Sie alle Optionen, die stimmen.

Nach dem Hören können Sie auch das Transkript zu Hilfe nehmen.




1 Beispiel 1

0:00 / 0:24



[Transkript](#)

Ben zeigt, dass er zuhört. Was sagt er?

- ☐ ich verstehe
- ☐ echt?
- ☐ sehr schön
- ☐ ach so?

[Überprüfen](#)

Figure 3b

4

FOLK Beispiel 4

ID: FOLK_E_00273_SE_01_T_06

i

<\$1> Fußball fängt früh an.

<\$2> Ja weiß ich. Ähm ich glaube mein Bruder war vier <\$E> lacht <\\$E>.

<\$1> Ja ja. Mit drei vier kannst du anfangen so was.

Welche Funktion hat 'ja' in Beispiel 4?

☐ 'Ja' beantwortet eine Frage.

☐ 'Ja' zeigt, dass S1 zuhört.

☒ Überprüfen

Figure 4: The materials were supplemented with examples from the FOLK corpus; here learners are asked to identify the function of the response token 'ja' (example taken from A1 – Freizeit)

Finally, alongside a verbatim transcript, we also produced one with some speaker errors highlighted and corrected to avoid possible confusion. Figure 5 shows an example of this.

B1 Politics – Brexit

The text on the left (transcript A) provides a verbatim (= word for word) transcription of the conversation. The text on the right (transcript B) provides an amended version, in which major language errors have been corrected. Where amendments were made, this is indicated through underlining.

<Sophie> Hallo. Wie geht's? <Helen> Hallo. Gut und dir? <Sophie> Ähm ja mir geht's ganz gut. Ähm was denkst du über <\$E> lacht <\\$E> Brexit? <Helen> Ahm das ist ein schwieriges Thema für mich. Ähm. <\$=> Es <\\$=> <u>Eigentlich es ist</u> kompliziert für mich ahm da ich in England lebe aber nicht aus England komme. Also für mich <u>ist es etwas nicht Positives</u> aber ich weiß dass es auch viele Menschen gibt die Brexit wollten und denken dass <u>vielleicht</u> ähm England äh Europa nicht braucht. Äh ich weiß nicht. Was meinst du? <Sophie> Ja also ich bin auch in <u>eine ähnliche</u> Situation. Ähm.	<Sophie> Hallo. Wie geht's? <Helen> Hallo. Gut und dir? <Sophie> Ähm ja mir geht's ganz gut. Ähm was denkst du über <\$E> lacht <\\$E> Brexit? <Helen> Ahm das ist ein schwieriges Thema für mich. Ähm. <\$=> Es <\\$=> <u>Eigentlich ist es</u> kompliziert für mich ahm da ich in England lebe aber nicht aus England komme. Also für mich <u>ist es nichts Positives</u> aber ich weiß dass es auch viele Menschen gibt die Brexit wollten und denken dass ähm England äh Europa <u>vielleicht</u> nicht braucht. Äh ich weiß nicht. Was meinst du? <Sophie> Ja also ich bin auch in <u>einer ähnlichen</u> Situation. Ähm.
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Figure 5: The recordings were transcribed and analysed for conversational features; two versions of each transcript were also included in the learner materials for reference – one version of the verbatim conversation, one amended version in which major language errors had been corrected (example taken from B1 – Politik).

In sum, the materials differed from common textbook materials in the following ways: they were led by the topics and types of conversations which learners of German stated that they most wished to have, higher level learners were employed to record spontaneous conversational models, the conversations were analysed and exercises developed using corpus linguistic techniques – focusing on common conversational features identified by corpus linguistic research and making comparison to a large corpus of spoken German.

For further detail regarding the materials design please see Bavendiek, Jones and Strigel (2025).

3.2 Study design

The current study focuses on exploring learners' perceptions of the materials outlined above. It took place over a period of six weeks in three stages. The first stage employed focus groups to answer research question one prior to using the materials, the second stage used oral diaries to answer research questions two and three, and finally stage three entailed the use of further focus groups after using the materials to answer research questions two and three. A more detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis follows.

3.3 Participants

We recruited 12 current adult students studying German at one higher education institution in the UK, two at A1, two at A2, four at B1 and four at B2 level. Each participant spoke English as a first language. Levels were assigned according to current classes learners were enrolled in, either on degree programmes or as members of the public or as students studying an extra- or co-curricular language class. Each participant received a shopping voucher for taking part in the study. Ethical approval for the project was given by the host institution and the ethical approval number is 13735.

3.4 Data collection

Prior to using the materials, each student took part in an online focus group of mixed levels, suitable for participants' varying schedules. It is generally recommended that focus groups employ a small number of prompts to start the discussion (Morgan 1997). We formulated prompts based on this principle, choosing questions which were felt to best answer the research questions. The first set of focus groups had the overall aim of trying to provide answers for research question one and the focus groups following the interaction with materials were trying to find answers to research questions two and three. The prompts used for both sets of focus groups can be found in Appendix 1.

Focus groups were chosen to enable group interaction and discussion, which would be harder to produce with, for example, individual interviews. As all participants were

studying German in the same L2 context, it was felt that they would share similar experiences of having conversations in L2 German and this could also prompt more ideas than in individual interviews. All focus groups used L1 English and were recorded and transcribed.

Diaries are commonly used in qualitative data collection from both a learner's and teacher's perspective to gain insight into language learning (e.g. Hall 2008). In this study, we employed them to gain insights into how the materials were understood and what learners noticed or used from them in the L2 German conversations they had. In their entries we also found that many commented on the extent to which they perceived that the materials helped (or did not help) with their reported difficulties in L2 German conversations. The diary data was used to answer research questions two and three.

Oral diaries were chosen to try and mitigate a common problem identified in the use of diaries (e.g. Dörnyei 2007), which is that they demand a lot of time from participants and this can lead to them not being completed. A further advantage of audio diaries is that due to their accessibility, the accounts provided may be quicker and thus more accurate and insightful (Monrouxe 2009). To further assist with this, diaries were recorded in L1 English and later transcribed. We also provided learners with basic questions to help guide their entries and asked them to speak for a minimum of five minutes each entry. This guidance can be found in Appendix 2.

Participants were first given a short introduction session which demonstrated how to find the self-access materials and explained what the requirements were for providing diaries. Each participant was asked to keep four oral diary entries over a four-week period and submit one of these per week, following use of the self-access materials.

In summary, we used the focus group data for answers to research question one, two and three, while the diary data were used to triangulate and extend answers to research questions two and three. Examples of how we achieved this via coding the data are explained in the next section.

3.5 Data analysis

Following transcription, NVivo 12 (QSR, 2020) software was used to sort and code the diary and focus group data into themes. The software was used for a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding meant we approached the data with themes

decided rather than only letting themes emerge from the data. Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019) tell us that this process will normally result in a limited number of codes as these will be focused on the research questions.

The diary and focus group data were analysed with the following process. The first researcher examined the diary and focus group data in NVivo and suggested the main themes (see Table 1 below) based on the research questions. These were agreed and then each researcher looked at the data to suggest possible sub-themes. Once the sub-themes were agreed, the first researcher coded the data and sent these to the second and third researcher for checking, until the samples in each code were agreed. All codes were grounded in the data by each researcher linking them to several examples from the data and agreeing that each example fitted the code. It was also agreed that the threshold for inclusion was that a comment had to have been made a minimum of three times by different participants.

After the deductive codes were agreed, researchers then looked at the whole data set again and we discussed, and agreed on the inductive codes and samples (see Table 1 below). We also agreed that it was not possible to code everything that participants said. For instance, numerous difficulties were mentioned (such as use of grammar and pronunciation) but it was decided to focus on the three most common areas mentioned.

To try and further ensure objective coding, we also examined the word frequencies in NVivo, which demonstrates the types of language participants often used to make particular points in diaries or focus groups. As an example, the thirteenth most frequent word used in code one (difficulties learners have in L2 German conversation) was ‘English’ and the fourteenth most common was ‘vocab’. This suggested that one difficulty that learners did report was translation/comparison between English and German. The themes, sub-themes and codes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding Framework.

Theme	Sub-theme	Code
1. Learner Difficulties in L2 German Conversations (RQ1)	Confidence Translation Vocabulary	1. Difficulties students have in L2 German conversations such as vocabulary *

2. Perceived Support from Learning Materials (RQ2)	General Confidence Translation Vocabulary	2. The extent to which the materials were perceived to have helped with these difficulties * 2.1 Perceived drawbacks of the materials **
3. Awareness of Conversational Language (RQ3)	Awareness of conversational language noticed in L2 use	3. Conversational language in the materials they reported noticing in conversations they had. *
3. Awareness of Conversational Language (RQ3)	Awareness of gaps revealed by materials	3.1 Aspects of the materials that helped learners notice gaps between their current interlanguage and model conversations. **
4. Use of Conversational Language from Materials (RQ3)	Actual use of conversational language	4. Conversational language in the materials they reported using in conversations they had. *
4. Use of Conversational Language from Materials (RQ3)	Intended future use of conversational language	4.1. Conversational language in the materials they hope to use in future conversations.**

*Deductive codes, ** Inductive codes

The first inductive code was one we predicted but felt as we explored the data should have its own code. These were the perceived drawbacks of the materials which some participants mentioned. The second inductive code was based on noticing the gap and there were repeated examples of this reported by learners. Noticing the gap was defined by Swain and Lapkin (1995) in relation to learners' own language production, which they suggest can help learners to become conscious of gaps between what they wish to say and can say. Here we take this to mean that a participant was able to notice gaps or similarities between their own conversational ability and something used in the materials. The second extra code was one we might have predicted in the context. Given that the time between using the materials and writing diaries or joining focus groups was short and opportunities to have conversations infrequent, many learners reported on aspects of the materials they hoped to use in future, rather than those they had actually used at the time of the study.

4. Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to each research question. Examples used were found by looking at the most frequent words used in each code and we have included three typical comments for each example. Pseudonyms have been used for each participant.

RQ1. What difficulties do learners report when having conversations in L2 German?

The difficulties learners reported were mainly discussed in the focus groups although some learners did mention them in their diary entries. The examples given for this research question are only from the focus groups. The most common difficulties reported can be linked to three main areas: confidence (feeling under prepared or not knowing what to say), translation and vocabulary. Many comments in these areas overlapped and the examples below were taken by searching the frequent words including ‘think’, ‘English’, ‘feel’ and ‘German’ and ‘speak’ in this code.

4.1 Confidence

Issues related to confidence reported by learners at all levels often related to worries about making errors, feeling they were not prepared enough to speak about a particular topic or that they did not have enough time to process what they wished to say. The following are typical comments.

- just, obviously you as you come into university, you learn more kind of like less basic, you know, structures like adding in the subjunctives and all that kind of stuff. I feel like that never comes into my head when I’m having a conversation with someone like someone a question straight off the bat and I’ll like I haven’t when I don’t have enough time to think about my answer. (Ken)
- I think as well, the nervousness about making mistakes. I wouldn’t say I’m necessary nervous, but I’m very conscious that word order in German is quite tricky. (Deidre)
- My level of confidence depends on you know whether the, whether it’s something that we’ve specifically like, learned about, whether that’s what else I’ve been at uni or you know in in high school, Sixth Form, yeah.....it’s very difficult to talk when I’ve not prepared something at least made notes uhm or like if I hear a word I don’t know, kind of panicking and not really knowing what to say. (Sally)

4.2 Translation

The issues reported in relation to translation were related to either the difficulties of directly translating (because it may cause issues with understanding) or the over reliance on translating, which was reported as an issue.

- ...whenever I speak, I translate everything I say from English. So I'm thinking what I want to say in English and then I I translate all that thing and sometimes there's some things that I say that don't sound right in German. (Elsie)
- I'm still trying to like translate in my head, so I like I know the sentence in English, but then I'm trying to like work out bit by bit before like I say it instead of like actually like conversing like freely. (Fred)
- I think I know the easier option and it tends to be like a direct English translation, which realistically is not not a German phrase or anything like it, would be like a typical German would say. (Sally)

4.3 Vocabulary

The reported problems with vocabulary related to not having enough vocabulary, or not having the right words when needing them in conversations.

- So I'm often struggling for words or having to find different ways to say things and that could make it feel like quite an unnatural... (Ena)
- ...if someone asks you a question and you don't know any vocab for it, it's kind of you try to sta...I tried to like stall as much as you can just to think of something to say, and then as a result, then you I just feel like 'Oh my God, this is going to be really wrong and it's just they're not gonna understand what I'm saying'. (Audrey)
-when you don't have the vocab, it's hard to get the message across of like how you feel and what exactly you're trying to say. (Bob)

RQ2. To what extent do learners perceive that the learner-led and corpus-informed materials helped with the reported difficulties

This area was discussed directly at the second set of focus groups but also mentioned in diaries by many participants. For this reason, both sets of comments were analysed

together. The comments can be categorised into general perceptions that the materials were helpful and specific comments regarding how they were perceived to help with confidence, translation and vocabulary, the specific issues mentioned in relation to research question one. The final category was comments related to how the materials were not perceived to help. Examples were again taken based on frequent words within this theme, in this case ‘think’, ‘words’, ‘useful’, ‘helpful’ and ‘speaking’. The overall perception was that the materials were useful to the learners. The reasons given for this varied from finding the listening helpful, to the focus on specific conversational strategies and features, to the topics covered. The following comments were typical examples, showing what a number of students said and are taken from diaries and focus groups, with this indicated after each example.

4.4 General perceptions of usefulness

- what I did like was the fact that even the instructions were all in German and I was really conscious about trying just to read it in German first and then if I was really struggling I would look up a word. (Sally – diary)
- also I think the small talk aspect, I think cause you kind of, like student 5 said, cause we’re probably so far advanced that actually the basic things we kind of neglect cause I think on the one hand I think it’s kind of like the assumption that we we just know it, it’s kind of second nature but actually it isn’t because you just you kind of forget it it’s like you go and do something and you’re like the most basic thing you just like ‘what what do I do?’. (Darren – focus group)
- I think a real strength of material of the materials was I can’t remember exactly the name of it at the moment, but I’m pretty sure that on all three the one section of the materials drew from a database that and the associated words. (Ena – diary)

4.5 Confidence

Many of the comments related to confidence were in regard to the use of higher-level learners and the fact that they made mistakes but communicated their message effectively, often interacting together to mutually construct the conversation.

- I think for me, it's made me realize that like speaking doesn't need to be as complicated as I thought it had to be, and also that I don't need to use like all these phrases that we're learning or have learned from A level. (Ken – diary)
- I found it like student 10 said, kind of reassuring. Only because it's like, even if he made some grammatical mistakes which on paper you were like, that's not particularly great that, like, I could still understand what they were saying and what they were like, what the meaning they were getting across. (Sven – focus group)
- I also liked how it it wasn't scripted, but like when one of them struggled or didn't know what to say, like the other one kind of filled in and helped fill that gap, which which felt quite comforting because normally I would literally just be sat there like I can't remember what I'm saying. (Sally – focus group)

4.6 Translation

Many of the comments related to confidence could also be interpreted as being related to over reliance on translation. However, there were also a small number of comments which related directly to translation. These comments generally pointed to the positive use of translation which the materials employed.

- the best task for vocabulary, in my opinion, was the very first one on each of the topics where it was asking you to talk about like that topic, for example, the environment and seeing or what kind of things would you say about the environment and having the picture prompts. Because I think that was when I was trying to think of things in English and then trying to translate them to German and then that was I think when I learnt a lot of vocabulary. (Fred – diary)
-you would see like these new phrases, and they felt like a nice like consolidating one, so like see them all written out and then find the translation. (Ken – diary)
- The folk-corpus-thingy was I think useful for like the different contexts of the 'und so', like something you don't really have like a specific translation for as such, or you have a specific translation for but it's quite helpful to actually see it in context. (Elsie – diary)

4.7 Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary, many of the participants mentioned using the conversation transcripts as a means to help them learn vocabulary. They also mentioned the value of particular formulaic sequences, often those drawn from the corpus-informed conversation strategies in the material which focused on specific conversational features.

- I found the transcript really useful to check the vocab I didn't know. I found that really helpful because some of the words, especially when the speakers were mispronouncing them on occasion, to be able to look at the corrected transcript, was really useful (Deidre – diary)
- So things like ‘that’s a good question’, ‘ohh yes’, and ‘I also think’, so that that was a different sort of of module, that one. And I found that one, in terms of my usage, the most useful. There's this sort of more academic those those discourse markers. ‘However’, ‘on the other hand’, I just put in my own notes here useful and memorable discourse markers which I think are easy to adapt to other conversations. (Ken – diary)
- But I have picked upon, like I said, some of the ‘ach so’ and ‘ja’ and ‘oder’ and I think they're not really taught in class, so these are things that are are more authentic, so they are helpful in that regard (Fred – focus group)

4.8 Drawbacks

Despite these positives, some drawbacks were also mentioned, in both diaries and focus groups. Many of these comments related to specific activities in the materials which were perceived to be less useful than others. Other comments related to the corpus focus or use of non-native speakers as conversation models. The following examples were typical comments.

- I didn't particularly find the...what was it called the focus activity (Folk corpus examples) particularly useful, which I guess was taken from real German conversation. So you theoretically I ought to find that useful and interesting, but I found analysing the students conversations who presumably are not native speakers, I found that more useful actually.obviously these are non-native

speakers and these are students that are learning German, but some of the pronunciation was too anglicised I think in the beginning. (Fred – diary)

-the card matching one, I kind of found annoying one because, I don't know, I couldn't remember where things were, so I ended up just like randomly moving around quickly just to get it done. It's kind of boring. (Sally – focus group)
- I liked the resources but some of the questions felt like they could have been harder, and I think it was specifically the drag-and-drop translation-one I think I would potentially have enjoyed actually translating it just to test that. (Elsie – diary)

RQ3. To what extent do learners perceive that the learner-led and corpus-informed materials helped them to notice or use common linguistic features of spoken German in L2 German conversations?

4.9 Noticing language from the materials in conversations

As mentioned, the comments in relation to noticing were less common in regard to what was noticed in conversations they heard and more common in relation to noticing gaps or similarities between the materials and their own conversational ability or aspects which the materials focused on in general. The lower frequency of reported noticing in conversations outside of the class may reflect the MFL context, where exposure to conversations in L2 German needs to be actively sought. The following are examples of reported noticing in conversations in diaries.

- I found the explanation of the vague language really useful cause I quite often hear these phrases, but I never quite know how to get them in. (Sven)
- Anything I noticed being used in German conversations I had or listened to, was, I noticed intensifiers with the 'gut' and intensifiers with 'nicht' being used commonly. (Bob)
- I noticed they were using both expressions quite a lot, like 'ach so' and 'echt', and also saying 'ja genau', I thought I learnt from that cause I always, never quite sure what that means when I hear it in conversations, so I think that's helped me understand that and also words like 'natürlich'. (Deidre)

4.10 Noticing the gaps

The more common aspects noticed were either gaps/similarities in participants' own language use or simply noticing things more generally in the materials. Here are examples of those comments.

- I guess obviously the focus of this module was the interspersing practically every other every sentence with either 'ja' or 'nicht' or 'also' or 'ja oder aber' everyday words, easy words put used in everyday German speech in a slightly different way than we would use it. So, I'm probably not yet good enough, confident enough, fluent enough to incorporate them in the way that the speakers did. (Sally – focus group)
- 'und so' has a variety of different meanings, you know, for 'and so on' and things like that, basically. I find I do that quite a lot because I can't think of when I'm on the spot, I'm kind of 'und so' kind of makes me hope that they can relate to what I'm saying. (Bob – diary)
- One thing I noticed as well is both speakers engaged a lot more with the with each other, you know like, so they'd asked a question or they'd be talking about their favourite series and the other person would come in and say 'yeah I agree and I bladibladiblah' (Ken – focus group)

4.11 Using language from the materials

In terms of using language from the materials, it was more common for participants to express an intention to use some of the language in the future. Again, this is likely to reflect the MFL context, where opportunities to practise have to be actively sought out. The following are examples of these comments in diaries, some of which include examples of actual use of language from the materials.

- In German conversations I've already had I would say that I am a bit more comfortable with using discourse markers now instead of just like just to ring up and say 'ja also'. (Bob)
- Well, I guess I would use 'ja' and 'nicht'. I'd love to have to be able to use 'oder' at the end of a sentence naturally. (Deidre)

- I do feel like I can use more of these filler words like ‘natürlich’, ‘stimmt’, ‘genau’, just like in those situations like the German Café. (Sven)

5. Discussion

5.1 Reported difficulties in L2 German conversation

While we can probably assume that the difficulties mentioned by learners are ones we would predict that many learners of second languages might have, they are nonetheless important for the findings of this study. Individual affective factors such as confidence, motivation and attitude to the second language are ones which have long been considered important in second language acquisition research (e.g. Clément et al. 1994) as they are likely to impact upon a learner’s acquisition of the second language. Krashen (1982), for example, long ago theorised that negative affect (such as anxiety about learning the second language) can be a barrier to acquisition. The difficulties with translation mentioned were often linked to these issues of confidence and demonstrated that there was a need for participants to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of translation, aiming for a balanced understanding of its value. It would be naïve to suggest that adult learners in a foreign language setting will not translate from L1 – L2 and adult learners would therefore benefit from strategies to help them use translation effectively.

Finally, the comments about vocabulary simply underline its importance for language use in L1 and L2, something which has long been established (e.g. Carter 2012). Numerous studies in the areas of spoken corpus linguistics demonstrate the frequency of formulaic sequences in conversations (e.g. Carter and McCarthy 2006) so it is not a surprise that learners report a lack of vocabulary as a major difficulty. The question raised by these comments is whether learners are getting input from current course materials which help them with highly frequent sequences used in conversations such as *ich auch* or *und so* and this is discussed in the next section.

5.2 How learner-led and corpus-informed materials can help with these difficulties

Overall, participants found the materials useful and their perceptions were that they could help address issues with confidence, vocabulary and translation. While it is probably impossible to resolve all such issues in a classroom, as mentioned in the literature review, Liu et al. (2024) found that learning materials which promote self-efficacy can contribute

to learners' engagement with self-access materials. This suggests that materials which are learner-led, such as the ones used in this study can play a part in helping learners to develop confidence in L2 speaking. This is because choosing topics which learners say they wish to talk about and using higher level learners as models of conversation can clearly lead to perceptions that these materials are worth engaging with. Using student-led topics and models spoken by higher level speakers' conversations seemed to boost confidence because it demonstrated that successful conversations are possible even with some errors and thus promoted self-efficacy, making them less worried about translating everything. This echoes arguments put forward in Cook (2010), suggesting that translation can be a highly effective tool in second language learning, if harnessed in a positive way.

As mentioned in the literature review, Siegel's (2014) study shows clearly that the conversation topics and types in materials do not always match what learners actually wish to talk about. This suggests that the model used here – to choose conversations which learners themselves want to have and model these with learners of higher proficiency than them – is one which can be used to address this issue.

In regards to vocabulary, it is also interesting to note that participants often mention the perceived usefulness of specific conversational lexis. This suggests that current German MFL materials which these learners are exposed to do not highlight such frequent lexis. This finding validates the corpus-informed approach taken to these materials, highlighting areas of spoken language such as vague language (Cutting 2015) which corpus studies we have reviewed show are very frequent. Put simply, if learners wish to take part in the conversations they wish to have, they need some frequent conversational lexis to help them in this aim. Using corpora to inform materials is a logical way to achieve this, particularly when other studies have reported the perceived benefits of such materials (e.g. Jones and Oakey 2024).

5.3 Noticing

The comments made in the diaries and focus groups show that participants did often notice the conversational language highlighted in the materials. Such examples are positive because, as discussed in the literature review, few studies have sought to understand what learners notice following instruction (Jones and Oakey 2024). Noticing

which language is used and how it is used has long been viewed as a crucial step on the road towards acquisition (Schmidt 1990) so it is useful to gain a clearer understanding that the materials did enable this process.

5.4 Language use

While we would not expect participants to immediately use the conversational language from the materials, the comments again suggest that the learners were both aware of the conversational language and motivated to incorporate some of it in their own future use. This validates the use of both learner-led and corpus-informed materials. The learner-led conversations seemed to motivate the learners to use the conversational language and, as noted in the literature review, affective factors such as motivation play a key role in second language acquisition. The fact that the language focus was corpus-informed ensured there was a focus on highly frequent conversational language, which validates the perceptions of learners that such material focuses on areas they are likely to need (e.g. Jones and Oakey 2024).

5.5 Perceived limitations of the materials

It is important to note that not all learners reported a perception that all exercises in the materials were useful. There was a reasonably prevalent view that these could be made more challenging and test the learners in some way on what they had learnt. In a minority of cases, the use of non-native speakers as models was not perceived to be helpful and the corpus-informed nature of the materials was also not something the participants viewed positively. These comments show the need to receive feedback from learners themselves on materials, especially when a new approach is being taken, in order to further enhance our understanding of how future materials can be designed.

6. Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that, overall, the corpus-informed and learner-led materials were perceived positively by the participants. This is important as materials that are considered to be useful are more likely to be effective. In particular, it seems that the materials presented here can help with some common conversational difficulties that the participants reported, such as confidence, vocabulary and translation issues. The fact that the conversation topics were student-led and that the materials focussed on specific

linguistic features of conversations was also considered beneficial by participants, as was the use of higher-level learners as conversational models to build confidence and promote self-efficacy, something Liu et al. (2024) have suggested is vital in ensuring engagement with self-access materials. This was specifically linked to the realisation that conversations need not be flawless to fulfil their communicative purpose. Participants further reported that the materials had raised their awareness of conversational features and that they felt motivated to implement their newly found knowledge in their own conversations. Thus, we can conclude that the production of further learner-led and corpus-informed materials is likely to be beneficial for language learners and should be encouraged. The drawbacks mentioned point to specific areas where the materials could be improved further.

These insights do not only enhance our understanding of perceptions and likely usefulness of corpus-informed and learner-led materials generally, but they are particularly important in the context of L2 German learning in UK HE. Despite German being the most widely spoken native language in the EU and the most sought-after language by UK employers (Jones 2019), the number of learners of German in UK schools has been declining. Consequently, British universities have seen a reduction in students taking up German. While recent political and cultural initiatives – such as the *Gimagine* project led by the Goethe-Institut – have been devised to enhance the uptake of German in the UK (Connolly 2024), such projects will take time before they show impact. To counter the trend and keep HE learners interested in learning German, it is therefore of utmost importance that learners have access to effective materials that they deem relevant, interesting and motivating. This study suggests that the type of materials presented here can help to address this need, moving the focus from grammatical accuracy to effective communication. The findings support Jones et al.’s (2018) argument that language learners with higher levels of competence can indeed provide an attainable conversational model to aspire to and that spoken corpus-informed materials can provide language which students can notice in their own L2 conversations and perceive to be useful.

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Keywords

conversations, spoken corpora, materials, learner perceptions

Appendix 1. Focus groups prompts

(1) Tell us about conversations you have in German (inside or outside of class)

What do you talk about? Who do you talk to?

(2) Tell us about what you find easy to manage in those conversations. Why is this?

(3) Tell us about difficulties you have when you undertake conversations in German. What are they? Why do you think these things are difficult? Can you give specific examples?

(4) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Follow-up questions were also used, where answers needed to be explored further.

At the end of the six-week study, a second set of focus groups was held, using the following prompts:

(1) Which materials did you use?

(2) In the first group you mentioned difficulties you have when you undertake conversations in German. These included:

Problems dealing with new topics you have not prepared for

Difficulty with accessing vocabulary

Some nervousness about getting things wrong

Translating from English

Any others you recall?

(3) To what extent do you feel the materials helped with any of these issues?

Which ones? How did they help or not help? Please give examples

(4) Is there anything else you would like to add about the materials?

Appendix 2. Diary template questions.

- (1) Which materials did you use?
- (2) What did you understand from the materials?
- (3) What (if anything) did you notice from the materials in German conversations you have had?
- (4) What (if anything) did you use from the materials in German conversations you have had?