

## What happens when students do activities in modern-language classrooms in higher education? A comparative, reflective study

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**Abstract:** This article reports on a small-scale action-research project carried out across two higher education contexts, in Finland and in France, with learners of German (as L3) and English (as L2) respectively. The aim of the project was to explore how students get into and stay in student-centred activities and the use of target language throughout these. Through this small-scale action research project we sought to explore the match or mismatch between expectations of what language learning activity types bring learners and the various language mediations we observed in our FL/ESP classrooms.

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**Keywords:** German as a foreign language learning; English for Specific Purposes; language learning in higher education; action research; student-centred activities.

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### Background

When designing learner-centred activities teachers should take into account the characteristics of the learner group, such as, age, learning style, motivation, and prior knowledge (cf. Sercu 2013). The level of activities should be located within the learner's zone of proximal development, which means that the exercises should not underestimate or overestimate what the learner can do. In addition, they should be based on content that the learner perceives as relevant. Based on our experiences, we can say that real-life tasks or simulations are purposeful when preparing students to real-life situations (see e.g. Council of Europe 2001, 9). Furthermore, task-based learning (TBL) is considered particularly appropriate for Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) contexts because it brings real-life relevance to language learning, drawing on learner discourse domains and thus promotes active student-centred learning (Ellis 2005; Whyte 2013). In TBL, tasks form "the basis for an entire language curriculum" (Ellis, 2003, p. 30). According to TBL, tasks are often defined as activities in which learners use the target language in real-life situations. Activities should be holistic, functional, and communicative; they should also focus on more than one single linguistic feature. Hence, TBL implies meaning-focused work in the classroom, that is, projects and simulations in the context of real language use outside the classroom. (Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001; Van den Branden 2006). According to Ellis (2005), a task-based teaching process involves three phases: pre-tasks, during task and post-task. The 'pre-task phase' concerns activities that students undertake before they start the actual task. The 'during task' phase includes the performance of the task itself. The final 'post task' phase covers

reflection on the task performance. According to Ellis, only the 'during task' phase is required in task-based teaching. In this study, we explore activities for potential task-based learning in higher education. However, as our lessons are built on small-scale activities rather than on large-scale tasks as suggested by Ellis (2003, Ch. 10; 2005), our examination of the use of different activity types could more likely be classified as 'task-supported language learning' (TSLL). In TSLL, the syllabus is supplemented with tasks so that activities and tasks are integrated into other activities in the classroom (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2011).

In the field of modern foreign language (MFL) education, there seems to be a consensus that we need empirical classroom research. For example, Nunan (1991, cited in 2005, 226), reviewed 50 studies and found that only 15 of them were classroom based. These classroom based studies revealed, for instance, that on average teachers tend to talk twice as much as students, in some studies even more than 80% of time (Nunan 2005, 227). This is a problematic but even more so in the context of teaching languages other than English in higher education where student proficiency is rather low. For instance, the role of German as a scientific language has diminished in Finland, and it is no longer as widely taught in Finnish schools as it used to be (see e.g., Kangasvieri 2017). Accordingly, teaching German as a foreign language (henceforth GFL) in higher education (HE) has to be less academic and more general in nature. Students expect, above all, that language courses should have a real-life relevance to them (see e.g., Lehto & Maijala 2013).

In the field of LSP, research has, for various reasons, tended to focus on text and discourse analysis and the use of specialised language rather than on what happens in LSP classrooms (Belcher 2013). Sarré & Whyté (2016) discussed these issues recently in the contexts of French HE in particular. As mentioned above, LSP teaching is highly dependent upon needs analysis to develop appropriate student-centred tasks and activities. This has led to LSP being described as "research-based language education" (Hyland 2013) with LSP teachers delving into disciplinary discourses and contexts to develop tasks for their learners. However, while this real-life consideration is certainly important in LSP there may be a considerable gap between designed tasks and activities and how they actually run in real classroom settings. Indeed as Van Den Branden notes, there is a need for classroom-based research that explores how both learners and teachers "perceive and reconstruct the classroom tasks they are confronted with", (2006, p. 2) taking into consideration how learners make meaningful use of language to attain an objective.

This small-scale study aims thus to address some of the above issues from an action-research perspective. Although teachers, textbooks and teaching materials have a "crucial mediating function" in language teaching practice, learning depends more on the activities, the tasks and the initiative of the learner (van Lier 2008, p. 163). Action research is not only important for creating learner-centred activities, but also for language teachers' professional growth, although "managing classrooms is normally something we do rather than analyse" (Wright 2005, p. 8).

*It can be useful in providing a sound source for pedagogical planning and action and enabling (them) to frame the local decisions of the classroom within broader educational, institutional and theoretical consideration (Burns 1999: 16).*

One important factor for the development of teachers' personal development is self-reflection. Tsui (2003: 13) states that

*Experience will only contribute to expertise if practitioners are capable of learning from it. To learn from experience requires that practitioners constantly reflect on their practices.*

Action research can be regarded as a tool for reflective practice (Wallace 1991; Burton 2009) that helps language teachers to develop an awareness of how teacher, task, learning situation, interlanguage competence (Selinker 1972) interact in second language learning. The study by Banegas et al. (2013) showed how a collaborative action research project improved teaching practices of Argentinian English teachers, and influenced students' motivation and language development. Our aim is to describe the context of our current teaching practices and to reflect on them. In this way, we want to "recount" our "past, present, and future" as language teachers in HE (Golombek 1998, 462).

## **Research project**

### **Research questions**

In this small-scale action research project, our overall aim was to reflect on how different activity types enhance learner-centredness in the MFL/LSP classroom. The functioning of different types of student-centred activities in teaching practice was analysed. Our study addressed the following research questions:

- Do the activities promote the use of target language?
- How do students stay on different type of activities?
- How do they use the target language (German; English)?

### **Participants and data**

#### ***Finland: German (L3) classroom in higher education***

Altogether 24 Finnish students learning German as an additional third or fourth foreign language (henceforth abbreviated as L3) for general academic purposes at the A2-level at a Finnish University participated in the study. In addition, two German-speaking tutors and the teacher-researcher were present in this German lesson in question. We collected video sequences during one lesson in October 2016 at the Continuation Course (in German Fortsetzungskurs I, CEFR level A2, and worth four ECTS<sup>1</sup>) at a Finnish university. The optional course lasted from the end of August 2016 to the end of November 2016. We collected video sequences during one lesson (90 minutes), which all contained different activity types. The classroom were organised in learning stations, in which students worked independently in small groups (3–4 students per group) and

concentrated on one task 15–20 minutes. Activity types used at stations included work with the textbook, oral discussion, and finding information on Internet. The lesson was video-recorded, for which a written permission was obtained from the students and the two German-speaking tutors. The students were also informed that they were taking part in research (cf. Burns 1999, 70–71). Approximately thirty-five minutes of video recordings were transcribed. Background noise in the classroom disturbed the encoding of students' performance to some extent. In addition, Finnish students do not generally speak loudly in the classroom, which occasionally made the encoding very difficult. Video recordings were used, because they can reveal both verbal and non-verbal behaviour (Burns 1999, 94–95). In Section 3, the activity types used at learning stations in the Finnish context are briefly described and reflected on from examples of the student conversations.

### ***France: ESP (L2) classroom in higher education***

University undergraduates in France typically have around three ECTS of English courses each semester, usually based on some form of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) relevant to the discipline they are studying. University students, particularly in the sciences, are aware that developing their English skills is important but even if they are motivated, they may not be able to devote much time and energy to English. Their focus is, understandably, on their university discipline. This may be even truer for students of medicine who alternate hospital placements with extremely dense course content.

In this context, language teaching needs to give students the opportunity to be as active in the language as possible. Blended learning formats allow teachers to maximize limited classroom time for speaking tasks. The widespread use of smartphones and tablets in daily life opens up many opportunities for oral production tasks in classroom teaching.

The French students with English as their second language (L2) in the study were second-year medical students following an optional course in medical English. This consisted of one 3-hour class per week for eight weeks. The average level of the student ranged from B1 to C1 with most at the B2 level. The course materials were organised thematically and included video/listening and reading comprehension activities, extended speaking activities with relevant language and vocabulary for medicine targeted in each class. Each teacher taught the same class, over a 3-hour timeslot, using the same materials. The second part of the class consisted of an extended oral production with variations in structure and set up. Each teacher took extensive notes, reflected on the way the tasks had run, and then compared their notes.

### **Data analysis**

Our aim was to investigate our own teaching practice using the methodology of action research and to integrate data collection into the regular activity of the lessons (Burns 2011). Our reflections on tasks are based on the COLT (communication orientation of language teaching) or MOLT (motivation orientation of language teaching) framework that was firstly introduced by Spada and Fröhlich (1995), and later modified by

Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008). We focused especially on the activity type (drill, role-play etc.), participant organization (group works/work in pairs) and student modality (Are students involved in listening, speaking, reading, writing or combination of these?). We also paid attention to the use of mother tongue, target language, and other languages by students. In this context, we observe use of multilingual language resources of students, that is, translanguaging. Translanguaging is a term that is used to describe multilingual language learners' ability to use different languages simultaneously and flexibly for communicative purposes (see e.g., Creese & Blackledge 2010; Canagarajah 2011).

Our aim is, above all, to reflect on the use of different types of activities, and to provide information on classroom practice that could be beneficial for language teachers in similar settings. In this way, we try to make tacit knowledge explicit. First, we present our results separately. Then, we reflect on the differences and similarities between Finnish and French classrooms.

## Reflections on tasks

### In the Finnish L3 classroom

In the Finnish context, the following activity types were analysed: oral activity with a German tutor (A), working with the textbook (B), and searching information in the internet (C). The teacher selected the activities.

Table 1: Overview of Activities in the Finnish L3 classroom

	A	B	C
Activity type	Conversation with the German tutor (to talk about dreams and future plans by using the conditional (in German <i>Konjunktiv II</i> ))	The text and the exercise were given to students on the previous lesson. They should now check it in their group. The answers are available at the learning station.	Searching flat announcements in the internet and then save them on the Padlet <sup>ii</sup> wall.
Participant organisation	In groups (3–5 students)		
Student modality	Students were involved in listening and speaking.	Students were involved in reading and writing.	Students were involved in reading and searching information.
Timing	15 minutes/group		
Materials during the task	PowerPoint slides (by the teacher), which include the grammar structure and examples. Available in the Moodle platform of the course.	The text "UNO-City" in the textbook <i>Passwort Deutsch 3</i> (Albrecht et al. 2008).	The internet address and the Padlet wall were available in the Moodle platform.

In oral activity A, students spoke following a model about their dreams and plans for the future by using the conditional (in German Konjunktiv II). They should speak after the model: Was sind Ihre Träume und Wünsche? Wenn ich im Lotto gewinnen würde... Ich hätte gern eine Sachertorte. They had practised the grammar in previous lessons. When discussing with a German tutor, students (S1 etc.) were mainly involved in listening. They seemed to understand everything the German tutor (T) was saying. They showed their comprehension by using compensation strategies (see e.g. Oxford 1990), namely nodding, speaking with their hands or other nonverbal activity, as the following excerpt shows:

[---] F: Und würde, I would like to do something. [S2 nods, the others stay still] Verben, also Dinge die du tun kannst. Fangen wir an mit wäre. Was wärest du gerne?

S2: Ich wäre hmmm eine Lehrerin.

T: Eine Lehrerin. Was für eine Lehrerin?

S2: Geographie.

T: Mit einem ganzen Satz?

S2: Ich wäre gern eine Lehrerin hmmm

T: ...für Geographie oder eine Geographielehrerin. Beides ist richtig.

S2: [nods]

T: Was wärest du gerne [turns to S3]?

S3: hmm, I don't know what it is in German? [laughs] [---]

[The metalanguage of the group was English, the italicized passages = original in the Finnish language]

As the example shows, the use of the target language was not controlled. This resulted in the students using only single words rather than complete sentences in German. They also used their “better” languages (Finnish and English). Although there was often silence in the group, students seem to attend by not using any languages but nodding or showing gestures (raising shoulders or ‘speaking with their hands’). When the proficiency level in the target language is this low, there has to be, for instance, a model dialogue available and more linguistic help (see e.g., Boers et al. 2016).

In activity B, students worked independently with the textbook. They had to find the respective grammar rule in the text “UNO-City” and then practice it. The correct answers were available at the learning station. The following excerpt reveals that the students have difficulties in using the textbook and that the global textbook does not provide any help:

[--]

S5: Does this mean that this Kristina [a person in the textbook] ()

S2: But if she

S3: But if this Kristina, so it perhaps is this () I don't know.

S2: But if we, but if it after all is so that in the subordinate clause () or? Why I do not find it? That part.

[S1 takes out his smartphone and types something.]

S2: Here it is.

[S4 writes down something in her book and then rubbers it out.]

S1: Did someone notice ()?

S3: [writes down something in her book.] Yes, isn't it the just ()

S1: I think it makes sense somehow

S2: ()

S4: Yes [The group work ends.]

[The metalanguages of the group were Finnish, the italicized passages = original in the Finnish language, () = segment of words that could not be transcribed]

Nevertheless, the students stayed on activity all the time. As the example shows, they were discussing nothing but the textbook exercise. Finally, they actually seemed to have found the grammar rule in question.

In activity C, students stayed focused during the entire recorded period. They even stayed on the given internet address. Students seemed to enjoy the activity although they mostly stayed silent. The search for a flat in the Internet had real life relevance for students, because many of them were planning to travel or study in German-speaking countries. Mainly the L1 was used in this task. The target language was only used when the German-speaking tutor or teacher visited the group and asked questions. The use of target language German seemed to cause frustration. This might be because Finnish university students are used to being able to express themselves very well in English (cf. McKay & Tom 1999, 16).

### **In the French L2 classroom**

In the French context, we analysed extended activity types (A-C), as shown in Table 2. For each activity type the students used either their own smartphones or recorded their mp4 using an iPad. Students were instructed and encouraged to complete the task in the target language. During the task teachers interacted in English with the students. They responded to questions, and requested for help but, overall, teacher intervention was minimal. In general, the students were left to complete their production on their own terms. Students made the recordings themselves with their own devices. Only in

rare cases, for technical reasons, did the teacher made the final recording. The student productions were uploaded to the class Moodle page and made available to all the class.

**Table 2: Summary of Activities in the French L2 Classroom**

	A	B	C
Activity type	Make a short instructional podcast mp3 for a medical procedure : lumbar puncture	Video role-play: pre-surgery consultation with the cardiologist (mp4 )	Make a short paper slide video animation :The science of pain (mp4)
Participant organisation	Pairs	Fours for preparation then pairs for recording	Groups of 3/4
Student modality	Students used class materials as a language resource. Key language elicited/practiced and a focus on intonation and pronunciation issues in first half of session.		
Timing	20m to prepare 20m to rehearse 20m to record		20m to write the script 20m to rehearse 20m to record
Materials during the task	-	-	Pictograms and drawings to cut up as/if needed.

The focus of these activities was to provide an opportunity for extended interaction in the collaboration/creation preparation stage, moving to more controlled production in the actual recording stage. Students found each of these tasks highly motivating and their end productions showed a good range of appropriate language with redeployment of the target language. However, it is important to note that initial enthusiasm led to loss of target language use in the first preparation phase with a lot of translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge 2010) between English and French and at times a complete loss of all interaction in the target language. The translanguaging also ensured the flow of interaction during the work of the students (cf. Nikula & Moore 2016).

Different groups had different strategies:

- Those that took many notes and wrote a script were quiet during the preparation phase and had a rather “wooden” intonation. Their production was very controlled.
- Those that had more spoken negotiation, with a lot of translanguaging during the preparation phase and a slightly freer plan produced more natural-sounding recordings.
- In some groups, there was disagreement on the appropriate strategy with weaker students wanting to script their production and stronger students keen to skip this step and to attempt a more spontaneous production.



- For task B, students enjoyed the creative “play” aspect of the imagined doctor/patient interaction with some students focussed on reproducing all the essential information, others were more on developing the imaginary situation (tension, confusion etc.).

These negotiations around the task raised issues for students, whatever their chosen method of preparation the students were testing the limits of what they could do spontaneously or not in their target language repertoire.

There was a marked contrast between activity types A, B and the animation activity C. For activity type C, the teacher gave more controlled instructions to the students. The pictograms provided a tighter framework and explicit instructions were given that the students should write a script. This animation task involves synchronizing voice and gesture and has a more closed range of language possibilities. Students remained in the target language more consistently throughout, moving pictograms to illustrate their speech raised awareness of intonation and chunking. They had to make several takes to complete the task. Overall, this was a more controlled task. In comparison to the others, it did not allow for simulation of a “real” context.

After the class, the students were able to watch and reflect on their and other students’ productions (cf. ‘post-task phase’ by Ellis 2005). This allowed them to reflect on the strategies they had put in place for each specific task as well as on the longer-term strategies they can implement to improve orally beyond the EFL classroom (e.g. shadowing). They were also encouraged to think about the language resources that were useful for the task and common mistakes they produced. This reinforces the student-centred approach in the classroom – they are able to reflect on their own language productions post task. The model here can navigate between the effective EFL medical student and an idealised native speaker/ medical professional and this is in keeping with the construction of language and professional identity in this student group.

### **Differences and similarities**

It was surprising to notice how many similarities there were between German (MFL, L3) classroom in Finland and English (LSP, L2) classroom in France. One striking similarity was that the interaction between students was limited. When trying to use the target language, there was a lot of translanguaging. In the Finnish L3 context, students felt often frustrated in using the target language. They switched easily to their own mother tongue. The video recordings revealed that non-verbal strategies helped, when students were trying to find the words in the target language German. More linguistic scaffolding in the target language was necessary (cf. Boers et al. 2016). In the French L2 context, student competence in the target language was higher. Here, enthusiasm and engagement in developing the imagined situation led to a loss of language focus. In the heat of the moment translanguaging helped and there was considerable mediation between French and English with a progressive return to the target language to complete the task.

In both classrooms, we observed that the balance was managed by carefully scaffolding and planning the sequence of activities, materials and instruction. We noticed that the

timing and progression through the activities was key. In both countries, the mother tongue and previously acquired languages helped in the classroom work. In the French context, mother tongue French was used besides the target language. In the Finnish context, when students worked on their own without the teacher and/or German-speaking tutor, they mostly used Finnish and not the target language German. When they discussed with the German tutor, the L2 English took the stronger role. Mostly there were three languages involved in the Finnish classroom (cf. Hammarberg 2010). In general, the spontaneous production in the target language was very limited.

With regard to the technology used in these tasks, we observed that it is motivating for the students to be able to control production and to produce something. The production can be real-life and authentic or simply an appeal to creativity and role-play. However, once again scaffolding was very important, not just for language use but also for the classroom organization and interaction with technology. For instance, when internet is used, it was important that links are available in the learning platform and that students know where they should search for information. In both contexts, the use of technology allowed for reflection on the task, and teachers could build upon this for future sessions.

## **Discussion**

In each of our very different contexts, we note a trade-off between investment in the activity and using the target language. In general, both L2 and L3 students were highly motivated and engaged by the activity types proposed. Language teachers tend to be very much focussed on target language use -particularly if their practice is built on communicative approaches to language teaching and TBL. Here we saw interactions between languages around the language task that, in the French L3 classroom, were partly resolved as they moved through the activities because of their higher language competence.

Students seemed to mobilize all their available language resources to complete the task in both L2 and L3 contexts. This raises questions about authentic language use. The translanguaging here was authentic to the task but might not be considered “authentic” in terms of target language practice. Recent research in applied linguistics indicates that language learning is most effective when it draws upon the entire linguistic repertoire of an individual (Bruen & Kelly 2016). For language teachers such mediation between languages may be challenging because it takes us away from the target language practice that we are so keen to engineer for our students.

As teachers, we may be ill at ease with language switching, loss of target language; however, for us, in this observation of our classrooms, the determining factor would seem to be the scaffolding and planning of the sequence. Put simply, there are different learning gains at each stage of the scaffolded sequence. Teachers have been aware for some time that students need careful scaffolding to stay in the target language and that this will vary according to language competence. However, we should also be more attentive to the way in which this scaffolding and sequencing allows for different

mediation, at different steps of the task, between learner languages – home, target, L2, L3. We need to consider this to be of value for the global objective of developing language competence in our students.

In the Finnish L3 context, it was also obvious that reading and listening skills in German had developed very fast but speaking skills very slowly. Previously learned languages, especially English, had an influence on the use of the target language. This is in line with the studies that have revealed increased influence of background languages in order to solve communication problems, when the proficiency level is low in the target language (here German) (for an overview see e.g., Falk & Bardel 2010). The slow development of speaking skills can cause frustration when adult students learn other languages than English, because they are used to being able to express themselves very well in English. Students found themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation, which can be especially frustrating for adult learners in university contexts (see e.g., McKay & Tom 1999, 16)

## Conclusion

This was a small-scale study comparing very different university student groups in Finland and in France, with learners of German (L3/L4) and English (L2) respectively. In general, we could observe that linguistic scaffolding was necessary when students were working on their tasks. We realised how strongly the teacher has to support the student-centredness in both L2 and L3 classrooms, as a facilitator and organiser of classroom talk. In the Finnish L3 classroom, linguistic scaffolding was necessary to bring the students to the target language. In the French L2 classroom, students had to be guided in order to bring them back to the target language. Without teacher-led scaffolding, the use of the target language remained limited. In both classrooms, we could observe use of multilingual language resources of students, that is, translanguaging. Learners used different languages simultaneously. In the Finnish L3 context, students used mostly one-word utterances in the target language. The video recording revealed that they utilised compensation strategies by showing their attention and comprehension not only in words but also with their body language, for instance, by nodding, by laughing, by pointing out etc. It was clear that the students understood what was happening in the target language but they could not yet express it with words. In the French L2 context, we noticed that initial enthusiasm often led to loss of target language use, even to a complete loss of all interaction in the target language. However, the translanguaging ensured the flow of interaction in this context. It is important that we as language teachers are able to observe these interactions, analyse them and reflect on how each step of the process contributes to language learning.

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<sup>i</sup>ECTS is a credit system designed to make it easier for students to move between different countries. Since they are based on the learning achievements and workload of a course, a student can transfer their ECTS credits from one university to another so they are added up to contribute to an individual's degree programme or training. ECTS helps to make learning more student-centred. It is a central tool in the Bologna Process, which aims to make national systems more compatible. ECTS also helps with the planning, delivery and evaluation of study programmes, and makes them more transparent. (Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources/european-credit-transfer-accumulation-system\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources/european-credit-transfer-accumulation-system_en))

<sup>ii</sup> Padlet is a software people use to make and share content with others. Somewhere between a document and a full-fledged website builder, Padlet empowers everyone to make the content they want, whether it's a quick bulletin board, a blog, or a portfolio (Source: <https://padlet.com/support/whatispadlet>)