

An initiative to utilize community resources in second language acquisition

Over the past years the number of speakers of German has declined substantially. In the 2006 Census 75,634 in Australia and 15,505 in Melbourne claimed to speak it at home. Australia-wide this constitutes a fall of one-third in comparison with 15 years earlier, largely due to increased language shift as well as a decrease in the migration of German-speaking people to Australia. Over the past two decades, the old rural German enclaves have completed their shift to English only.

Yet of the German speakers, 39.7% are over the age of 65. It is older people that are a very good source of German to share with the young, as we will see below. Inter-generational interaction is considered by gerontologists to be essential for 'healthy ageing'. A team from Monash has recently embarked on an ARC Linkage project which attempts to bridge the gap between Australia's multilingual society and its pervasive monolingual mindset.

The project, which will run for 3 years, has the following aims:

1. To give younger Australians learning a L2 and older bilingual people whose L1 the students are learning the opportunity to meet and converse in the language
2. To assess the effects of such encounters on the students' L2 proficiency, conversation management skills, language attitudes, cultural knowledge, attitudes to ageing
3. To assess the effects on the well-being and self-esteem, empowerment and feeling of belonging of older bilingual Australians

The conversations are about an hour a fortnight in duration, with Year 11 and 12 students paired with older participants.

The languages which the project explores are Chinese (Mandarin), German and Spanish, and there are three schools, two government and one independent in the south-east suburbs of Melbourne, whose students are participating. The basis of the research will be the analysis of three sessions annually which are taped, a student focus group, and phone or face to face interviews with the older participants. The older participants are volunteers whom we have contacted via ethnic societies, welfare agencies and churches. It is significant that we have had more than twice as many German-speaking volunteers as we require. Members of the research team are Professor Colette Browning (Faculty of Medicine), Professor Michael Clyne, Dr Marisa Cordella, Dr Hui Huang, Ms Ramona Baumgartner, Ms Tong Shen, and Mr Andrés Villimazar. The partner organizations in the ARC project are the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Independent Schools Victoria, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Council for the Ageing.

A VCE detailed study is being developed based on the project as part of the project across the three languages by teachers from different languages and educational sectors. It will be adaptable to other language subjects.

The project was successfully piloted at university level in 2nd Semester 2008 in German, Italian, and Spanish, with students generally visiting the older participants in their homes. Although the period of time of the project was found to be too short to provide evidence of grammatical or lexical change, there was a clear advancement in conversational management from question-answer to collaborative discourse.

Other benefits discussed by the older participants in the interviews included:

- Students' appreciation of the migration experience;
- Shared language identity, with some participants 'adopting' their student partners as grandparents;
- A feeling of greater self-esteem;
- A feeling of self-worth, of doing something for the young and for their language; this also gives them the opportunity to get to know another generation and discard prejudices about them.

The pilot project with university students has continued as an undertaking with a life of its own and will do so alongside the upper secondary project. It is now coordinated by Dr Marisa Cordella (Spanish), Dr Hui Huang (Chinese), and Dr Heinz Kreutz (German).

The utilization of community resources in structured second language learning environments such as the school or university classroom has the obvious advantage of providing students with additional practice scenarios, increasing exposure time and recreating acquisition settings which complement the more formal learning environment. Early evaluation of the German university project (see above) sheds light on both educational and social benefits of the intergenerational language learning initiative. The changing perspectives to the participants – German students and German elders – illustrate how their interactions contribute to what social systems research likes to refer to as 'capacity' and 'resilience'. Capacity, especially adaptive capacity, offers a conceptual tool that lends itself well to the context of intergenerational projects such as ours. If you look at capacity in terms of strengths and resources available within our ageing migrant community, and how their cultural knowledge and desire to share that knowledge can be applied to mitigate the challenge of a changing demographic, then their potential to contribute cannot be underestimated. Their capacity to contribute makes for a more resilient community, because they help to create adaptive positive outcomes in response to change. The idea of strengthening resilience in order to cope with change is crucial when addressing shifting notions of bi-cultural identity and social isolation among our elderly German migrant community. Enhancing our students' resilience in that they become better equipped to cope with diversity and the challenges of handling *in situ* second language discourse is equally important.

Across Melbourne's thirty municipalities, much research has been undertaken in recent times into the question of active, healthy and positive ageing. Three key themes have emerged; these are a) autonomy and agency, i.e. staying independent as long as possible, b) self-reliance (people wanting to manage their own affairs and conditions) and c) community attitudes (ageism and thus created constraints on civic participation and engagement). For example, we know from our German participants that they wish to make an active contribution, be relevant, autonomous and retain a sense of 'agency'. In this sense, they are no different to many other, migrant and non-migrant, residents across the state. In fact, the opportunity to pass on one's linguistic and cultural expertise provides an enhanced 'active ageing' experience, to use a popular term often applied by Local and State Government service delivery providers. Similarly, our much younger student participants also develop and experience a heightened sense of learner autonomy and agency. It is this shared experience of autonomy and agency which makes the Monash intergenerational language learning project so special. It creates an environment where the interests of different generations intersect, each enhancing the other's experience of self, identity and agency. The German language and culture provides the conceptual and social glue that allows a connection through which both sides benefit. The importance of interacting with authentic communities cannot be underestimated. Social research at the local community level informs us that inter-generational friendship and empathy are spaces for integrative motivation. We also know from second language acquisition research that integrative motivation can be one of the strongest drivers of success.

The two Monash University German intergenerational language learning projects address challenges that apply to our young language learners and elderly migrants alike. Strengthening relationships, increased collaboration and active engagement across generations provides an opportunity to tap into and revitalise the dwindling resource of German speakers - students and migrants – in Victoria. We hope that our projects will continue to contribute to active engagement by both groups and assist in shaping future attitudes and interactions across our commonly shared language and culture.

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