

9 “Become a reporter”, the Four Skills News Project: applying and practising language skills using digital tools for level C1/C2 students

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Abstract

The Four Skills News Project is an example of communicative language learning, developed for final year German students at the University of Liverpool. It focuses on how students use and practise their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills via the creative use of news reports and digital technology. Each student creates an avatar using an interactive platform, practicing speaking and correct pronunciation with the help of autocue and thereby enhances his or her language learning experience. Through listening, writing and their own research, students also practise their translating skills. In the final stage of this project, students present their own news item and this also gives them the opportunity to practise their presentation and speaking skills using autocue. Students are filmed and get valuable feedback on their performance in addition to having done something completely new and different that is fun in their final semester at university.

Keywords: digital learning, independent learning, reporter skills, rhetorical skills.

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1. Introduction

In language teaching, our aim is that students master receptive, productive as well as mediative skills. But how can we achieve this as language tutors? The following article describes a creative and interactive project for students in level C1 and C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, where students can practise all of the above language skills².

Fast-moving technologies define our age, but we as staff or so-called digital immigrants are probably going to be at least one step behind our students or so-called digital natives (Prensky, 2001) when it comes to knowledge about the latest Information Technology (IT). We can, however, try to implement some digital tools in our language teaching and students' language learning³.

Applying these two elements, new technologies and various language skills, is the main purpose of the Four Skills News Project. This is done in German at the University of Liverpool, but it can be adapted to any foreign language. It can be either an assessed or a formative exercise. The Four Skills News Project is designed to be taught in weeks 3, 6 and 10 of the second semester to build up practical language competence, although each of the three components can be used individually.

The receptive skills of reading and listening are practised by researching articles and close-listening and transcribing a short news clip. The productive skills, writing and speaking, are applied when students prepare their own news clip, and the mediative skills, translating and consecutive interpreting as well as summarising texts from one language into another are used when learners research the website of their home university and prepare it in the target language and thereby create a news item.

2. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp

3. The Four Skills News Project was developed by Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl at the University of Liverpool from 2011 and enhanced by digital resources mentioned in 'Listen, Speak, Read, Write Web', a workshop given by Joe Dale at the University of Liverpool on 9th February 2015.

In the Four Skills News Project language learners practise and apply all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking acquired over the first few years at university. The student-produced news clips are recorded on film and can be put on a website.

2. Create a journalist avatar

This project is based around current affairs. In the languages lab, students first listen to a one-minute audio news clip in the target language chosen by their language tutors. In German, we use [Deutsche Welle](#) as this website offers a slowly spoken version of news. This allows listeners to take notes and the lab facilities allow them to listen to the audio as many times as necessary. This is a good warm-up exercise to get students used to a lab setting and to listening attentively. At the same time, they can research a similar topic using online newspapers to find technical terms, regionalisms or any other vocabulary relevant to this topic. Students are then asked to write a summary of the news in the target language and check their spelling and grammar. Distributing in advance a list of frequent mistakes such as verb-noun agreement and syntax helps students be more precise in their writing skills.

When finished, the summary can be animated by an avatar using the website www.voki.com. This tool is very user-friendly, students simply click on 'create', select the language and give their avatars a face, then use the key with the 'T' (for text) on it to give it a voice. After pasting in the summary into the textbox and making sure that all components are satisfactory, it can be published. This creates a weblink that can be put on the interactive [padlet platform](#). By double-clicking on the wall and entering the first name only (as it is publicly accessible) everybody's voki weblink can be added on the padlet. Students can be encouraged to listen to classmates' news summaries. The avatars are fun and simple to create and they take away the embarrassment of hearing one's own voice while still being able to listen to correct pronunciation despite the robot-like demeanour.

3. The news presenter's body language

As a next step in preparation for class in week 6, learners are required to imitate a native speaker news reporter. In their own time, students choose any one-minute news item in their target language that interests them. This is a good opportunity for students doing joint honours degrees to practise vocabulary relevant to their second subject, e.g. business, law, history, etc. Students take notes and transcribe the text; this requires accurate listening skills. When they have finished, they should practise reading the news using the correct intonation, imitate the reporter's rhythm, tone of voice and facial expressions. The objective is to imitate the actual reporter as closely as possible. Another part of this exercise is to use the reporter's gestures and demeanour. Students can choose news clips from different areas or countries. With the German language, it could also be with a Swiss or Austrian accent, which makes particular sense if students have spent their year abroad there. This is entirely acceptable, as long as it is consistent.

Learners record themselves either in the languages lab or at home with their electronic devices until they are happy with the result. If there are uncertainties with regards to content and comprehension, it helps if they read newspaper articles in the target language relevant to this topic. This will give them additional information and relevant vocabulary or technical terms. These articles need to go into the bibliography. Students should email their text and the links used to themselves so that they can copy and paste them into an autocue website in the languages lab. With new words, we recommend that students listen to them several times on online dictionaries to be confident when saying them.

In class in week 6, students present their news using an autocue tool on the cueprompter website which lets them choose the speed at which they read and makes for a more natural recording. When students listen to their recording, they should also analyse what they would do differently. Once they are happy, the recording could be put on a voki avatar and added to the padlet. Again, it is also fun for them to listen to their classmates' news reports.

4. Putting it all into practice: the student news report

Language learners are asked to prepare and write their own news report. The crucial part is research. So as to avoid the temptation to cut and paste, we recommend that students research what is going on at their own university from the homepage or from the university blogs. Chances are that the university's internal news will not exist on a news platform in the target language, so students will have to create their own piece of news after having researched in English. Students summarise English news in the target language. Students also need to be aware that news items are formal, but in a spoken register, therefore sentences need to be short enough to be understood by any listener. Again, students can choose a topic that interests them and that is related to their degree. Links must be put in a bibliography. Students prepare a one-minute news report in the target language now applying the vocabulary and phrases that they have acquired during their research. Important parts are also a greeting, transition and an end to the news item which they can copy from actual news broadcasts they have previously listened to. After practising speaking it and learning it by heart, it can be presented in class, or students can use the autocue again. The essential part here is to use the correct demeanour and gestures, tone of voice and the language cadences, the correct pronunciation, register and grammar. After first using an avatar with and without their voice, students at Liverpool are now filmed in class. They can now show that they are confident speaking and being a reporter. They can use the autocue programme if learning their text by heart is too difficult. Dressing formally helps for this exercise and boosts their confidence. This can be assessed as an oral exam. Alternatively, the whole project can be assessed as a portfolio.

The emphasis on pronunciation and speech in this project is not a general remedy for all ills, and it will not make students speak with a perfect accent forever, but they learn to self-diagnose mistakes and to correct errors.

If put on a website, it also gives an interesting news stream in the target language about what is happening at their alma mater. It shows a good range of student

representation that is inspiring for prospective students and it is useful for open days and the like. Professional presentation skills are important for employability. This project can either be formative or summative. As an assessment, individual components can be evaluated, or the progress can be put in a portfolio, or the last component can be assessed as an oral exam.

In conclusion, the above application of the Four Skills News Project is like a cooking recipe that can be used to inspire any tutor to use its method (or ingredients) to make his or her own creations. This application of the project foregrounds creativity within a strict set of parameters that enhances students' confidence in the foreign language. Encouraging final-year students to work collaboratively in this way is a welcome respite from their focus on their degree results. This may have a positive outcome on the way that the students view their final year of university.

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Reference

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>

Useful websites

Deutsche Welle (German news, spoken slowly): <http://www.dw.de>
<http://voki.com> to create avatars
<https://padlet.com> to create an interactive platform
<http://cueprompter.com> to use the autocue feature



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