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**What's that noise? Audio Applications for Improving Pronunciation
and Fluency**

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges of teaching a language in an environment where that language isn't regularly heard or used is to create and offer opportunities for students to use spoken language outside class. With the help of technology scaffolded practise for improving pronunciation and prosody is made a lot easier. Allowing students who are more advanced to make creative and learner-centred use of their language abilities has also become a lot simpler. This article will outline examples of speaking tasks for German offered at a university in the UK. Potential benefits and problems will both be addressed. It will be demonstrated that such applications can be implemented to both the greatest benefit of the student and with an eye on as little time as possible spent by the instructor battling technology.

論文要旨

外国語を、その言語を日常的に聞いたり使ったりするわけではない環境で教える際の困難のひとつは、授業の枠外でその言語を話す機会を提供することである。最新の学習技術の利用により、発音とプロソディーを改善するための効果的な訓練を行なうことは、はるかに容易になり、また上級レベルの学生も、その言語能力を創造的かつ自分のニーズに合う形で発揮することができるようになる。本論においては、イギリスの大学において実践された言語訓練を例に、その効果と起こりうる問題について考察し、こうした技術の利用が容易に実践可能であることを示す。利用される技術は、外国語学習者にとっては非常に大きなメリットをもたらすものであると同時に、教師にとっても使いこなすことが難しいものではない。

“What is truly new [with podcasting] is that learner experience and contribution is in the middle of the innovation, for the first time. And it is only just beginning.”
(Salmon 2008,172)

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges a language teacher faces in an environment where the target language (TL) taught is not frequently heard or spoken is to offer speaking opportunities to students. With the ascend of the internet there is no shortage of materials that learners may passively engage with, and through Skype and other formats there are also chances to practise language actively. However, many learners do not engage in such activities on their own volition. Be it because they are not aware of them, or because it does not suit their preferred learning style, or perhaps they are not technology-savvy enough. But with skilled and dedicated teachers helping selecting material, today you can do all the reading and listening you could possibly hope for on your own accord. A little more different it is with writing, but there are platforms for that as well, where people learning languages exchange texts in their TLs and where teachers, native speakers, or proficient others give feedback on submitted texts. In any case, in traditional teaching materials there are usually quite a few writing tasks. And there are speaking tasks as well. But the speaking can usually only take place inside class. Writing on the other hand often takes place outside class. The challenge for language teachers is thus, to offer additional speaking opportunities outside class. In order to keep motivation high and to entice students even further, speaking tasks are ideally engaging, meaningful or fun or possibly all of these. The present article presents two conjoined and integrated projects running at the University of Leeds since 2009. The basis for the article is a case study with some subsequent action research carried out.

Fluency and pronunciation

Fluency often crops up when conversational tasks are talked about. But what exactly is fluency and how can it be defined? Lennon (1997, 390) defines fluency as speech at the speed of native speakers unimpeded by pauses. Chambers (1997, 540) points out that not breaks as such, but rather the specific lengths of breaks or hesitations and the distribution of them in utterances makes for a native-like or non-native perception of the speech act. The overriding question for language teachers is obviously, how learners may be guided towards achieving high levels of oral proficiency and how they may improve their oral performance successfully. As a component of teaching oral competence, pronunciation is often directly addressed by teachers and textbooks alike. This is particularly true at the early stages of language learning. The big question is now, how does pronunciation figure in relation to fluency. Park (2009) suggests a model for oral proficiency, featuring the two main branches fluency and accuracy in accordance with Lennon and Chambers. Fluency is then further subdivided into smoothness and speed. Speed Park defines closer as being characterised by temporal variables.

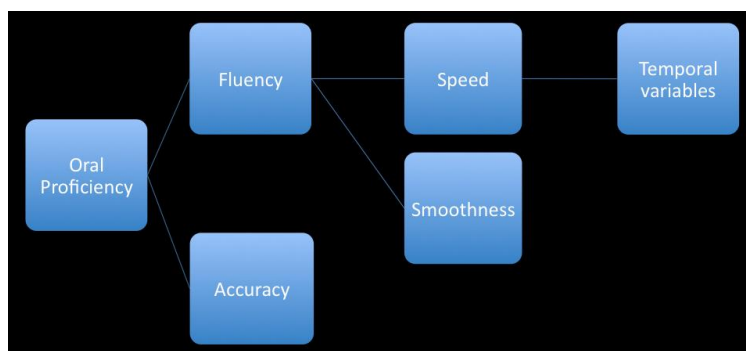


Fig 1 (Park, 2009)

Park adds the component of smoothness to his description of fluency. Smoothness he defines rather along pragmatic and perceptive lines than focusing on production. But the question where exactly pronunciation comes into the picture remains. It might be that he regards pronunciation to be an exclusive aspect of speech accuracy. However, would that not mean that pronunciation is virtually not related to fluency at all? Why then would both teachers and teaching materials focus on pronunciation and especially at early learning stages to such an extent? Also, does accuracy merely refer to correct choice of word order, vocabulary etc or is it also concerned with issues of pronunciation. Pronunciation and fluency being properties of rather distinct realms conflicts with the fact that “having a foreign accent” is often equated with possessing little or no fluency. I would like to suggest that pronunciation cannot clearly be allocated to either of the two branches. Rather it dwells in between fluency and accuracy and has a role to play for both.

The situation at Leeds

First up, some background information on the situation at the University of Leeds needs to be given. Students studying German at the department of German, Russian, and Slavonic Studies at the University of Leeds come to university with A-Levels in German. That means they roughly have a lower intermediate level (B1 in the Common European Framework for Languages) in the target language (TL) already upon commencing their further language studies in higher education. This makes the situation quite distinct from most foreign language teaching in Japan, with the notable exception of English. However, even for English in Japan the language level that a majority of students achieve upon arrival at university may be considerably lower. German students at Leeds then receive 3 hours of language tuition per week. On top of that other classes within the German curriculum are required to be taken. But not all of these are also taught through the medium of the TL. The department offers very little if any formal tuition in German pronunciation, phonetics, or even more general Linguistics. As will be shown, this has a profound effect on the type of training exercises could be chosen for the students and on how feedback on aspects of oral proficiency could be given by tutors.

The two-tiered model at Leeds

In order to support students in different aspects of their oral proficiency a two-tiered approach was chosen. One features rather narrow and highly guided pronunciation tasks and the other much freer practice in the TL.

The tongue twister platform

Theoretical considerations

For improving pronunciation of phonemes, clusters, for practising word and phrasal stress, intonation and aspects of rhythm a format was chosen where students have to complete a weekly speaking task on the Wimba Voice Board (VB) platform. This voice board was embedded into the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) at Leeds. Every module has its own space on this VLE. The VB is an integral part of the Core Language module in year one, where the two-tiered model for improving fluency and oral proficiency has been tried. Students have to complete a weekly speaking task, performing (reading out aloud) a number of tongue twisters or a poem, each with a particular focus on issues of pronunciation and accuracy. Thus, it can be viewed to be very scaffolded, guided and the more traditional tier of allowing for practice in oral proficiency of students at Leeds. Scaffolding here is understood in the sense introduced by Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976, 91f). They regarded scaffolding as guiding and assisting learners by a variety of measures taken in developing and phrasing exercise tasks. It also refers to the support given during the process of tackling tasks. Scaffolding may also be interpreted as the link between what Vygotsky calls “actual developmental level” and “potential developmental level” (86-91). In consequence, scaffolding is an extremely vital aspect of the facilitating role of the language instructor. Support through scaffolding aims to help bridge the gap between the maximum potential inherent in the exercise and the actual learner’s approach. It is not to be misunderstood as a singular or sole method to be used. Rather it is desirable to tie in scaffolded tasks with more creative, self-directed and explorative tasks in order to create a blend and mix of stimuli for the learner. The setup of the tasks also made use, to a limited extent, of research on chunks and their potential to be remembered more easily. The tasks are thus akin to some research carried out on formulaic language where “various types of wordstring [...] appear to be stored and retrieved whole from memory” (Wray 2000, 1f). Consequently, it was partly expected that students using the VB would benefit both from formulaic learning of patterns and from a heightened awareness of their own pronunciation and prosody through listening to their own performances and extensive feedback.

The Voice Board: opportunities and limitations

The Leeds VB gives students access to the written version of the task to be performed and to a model audio version. Students are encouraged to practise these tasks several times before attempting to record themselves. This has to be said to be a piece of advice not always followed. This could be inferred from an analysis of some of the access data for the VB. The VB is, like the Blackboard VLE, licensed software, and this is the big drawback for people out there who would merely like to experiment with the functionalities and opportunities of such pieces of technology. However, there are cheaper or even free versions available that share most of the characteristics of the VB. The use of the tongue twister platform was demonstrated in class and there are also interactive audio-visual presentations available within the module area of the VLE that explain usage and completion of tasks step by step if students are unsure about how to complete tasks on the platform. Both the VB’s advantages and its downsides lie in its simplicity.

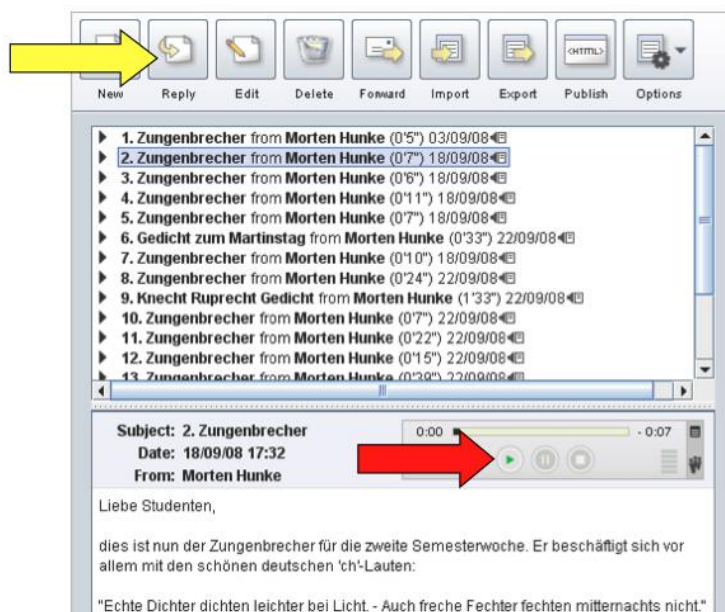


Fig 2 The Wimba Voice Board

With the help of very few buttons students have immediate access to their weekly task, featuring the written text and the audio cue. Technically completing the task is equally simple. The task is selected and the reply button is clicked. The buttons for recording are standard sound equipment buttons. Getting it wrong is a hard thing to do. From then on a tree structure unfolds, similar to that known from chat forum entries. The student's audio performance of the task is classed as a reply to the initial entry. Similarly the tutor's feedback is yet again classed as a reply to the student's performance (see Fig 3). Thus, everything is very neat and easily accessible to all involved. All students in the same tutorial group could potentially listen to all other contributions. The set up of the VB thus allows for peer access, with the inherent potential for peer feedback and peer monitoring. This aspect is, however, not currently used at Leeds for this particular application.¹ Feedback on the students' performance is given orally. Tutors give feedback roughly every three weeks. Unfortunately, once audio is recorded within the Wimba VB, it cannot be edited or changed by the student. If changes are required a new version needs to be recorded. This is a serious limitation of the software and the setup of the Blackboard VLE. Only module coordinators and tutors have access to the sound files. They could potentially export the file and then use additional editing software to manipulate the file. This is, however, rather clunky and much too complicated for the use in conjunction with frequent and regular speaking tasks.

Pronunciation and fluency

The feedback given by tutors may not entail pronunciation advice on a very abstract level, due to the lack of instruction in such fields for the entire student body studying German. The feedback aims to make aware of tendencies in the student's pronunciation, use of word and phrasal stress, intonation and the rhythmic characteristics of their performance. Patterns are often repeated in the correct manner after stating the areas that require improvement.

¹ It is used for another application supported by the VB, featuring reflective podcasts during the compulsory year abroad.

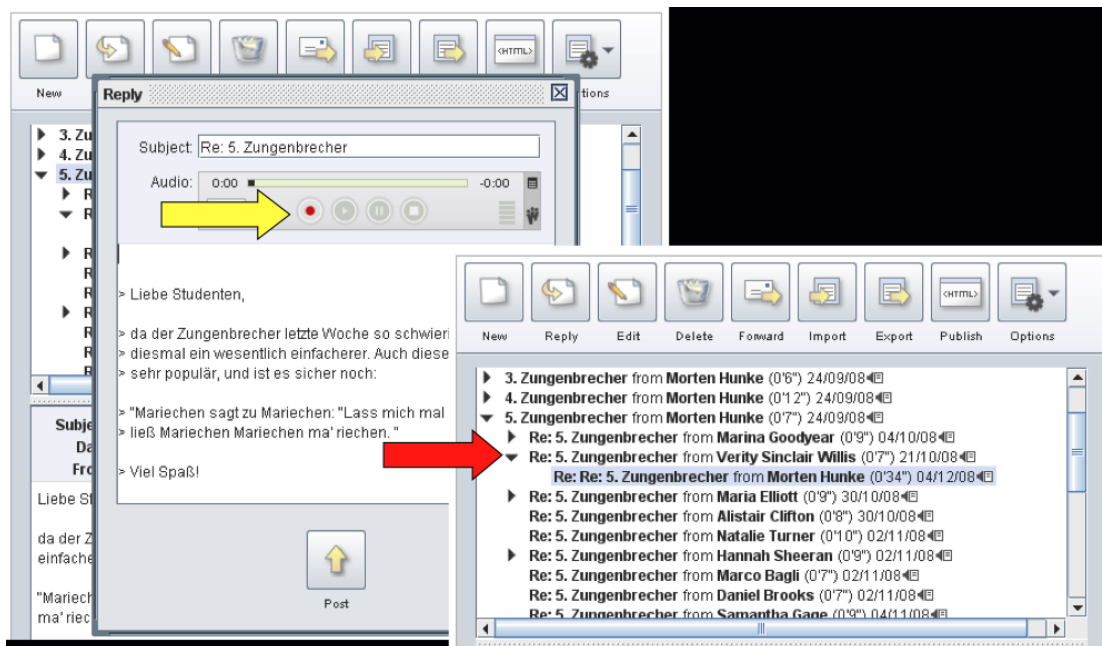


Fig 3 Tree structure

Students are required to complete a weekly speaking task. They are encouraged to practise the task at hand a few times before recording it. And even after recording it, in a self-feedback phase, they are asked to listen to their own recording and to re-record the speaking task if that is deemed necessary. Students are required to keep a study log on this self-feedback aspect of the weekly oral performance tasks. An important aspect of the entire setup is, that students learn to engage with their own speech performance. It is anticipated that they achieve a greater awareness of their own pronunciation in the TL in general. They are subsequently also expected to challenge their own, potentially fossilised, mispronunciations of phonemes and/or clusters. Not only segmental aspects of pronunciation are practised, but also so-called suprasegmentalia, i.e. the various aspects of prosody². Especially for this purpose, the tasks include a number of poems in order to allow students access to prosodically more complex and slightly longer textual cues. Naturally, with poems and prosody, there is not always a uniquely correct way to perform them. Word stress is probably the aspect of prosody that is most regular and rule-based. Once we get to phrasal or sentence, stress, intonation and rhythm, the picture gets a lot more complex and less obvious. However, particularly the reduction of unstressed syllables in Germanic languages³ is an aspect of pronunciation often overlooked or not practised enough by learners of such languages. This aspect of prosody is closest linked to the rhythmic qualities of an utterance. Maintaining a particular, perhaps even native-like rhythm is an important step towards achieving fluency.

² Prosody is traditionally understood to consist of the following: word and phrasal stress, intonation and rhythm.

³ Stress-timing languages like German, English etc. often present a substantial problem for speakers of more syllable-timing languages, like Romance languages and to some extent even Japanese. Speakers of such native languages (L1) often find it difficult to reduce the unstressed syllables sufficiently in terms of pitch, volume and intensity. This in turn leads to markedly non-native and marked pronunciations. Practising to reduce unstressed syllables is an integral part of improving oral performance in stress-timing languages.

Text base for oral fluency performance drills

The weekly oral production tasks contain a variety of performance tasks that are geared as much possible to the need of native speakers of English. They are comprised of a number of tongue twisters and popular poems alike. The tasks are started off with a popular poem: Bewaffneter Friede (Armed Peace)

"Ganz unverhofft, an einem Hügel,
sind sich begegnet Fuchs und Igel.
Halt, rief der Fuchs, du Bösewicht!
Kennst du des Königs Order nicht?
Ist nicht der Friede längst verkündigt,
und weißt du nicht, dass jeder sündigt,
der immer noch gerüstet geht?
Im Namen seiner Majestät
geh her und übergib dein Fell.
(Wilhelm Busch)

Quoted here, is merely the first verse. The poem exhibits a multitude of German vowel sounds and consonant clusters for students to tackle and try out. Getting the prosodic issues like stress or rhythm absolutely right, is not as important at this initiating stage, but feedback is given on this aspect of the oral performance as well. An example for the tongue twisters, geared towards native English speakers' difficulties with German pronunciation is the following:

"Gelbe Blumen blühen beim Birnbaum – Blühen beim Apfelbaum blaue Blumen? "
(author unknown)

To distinguish between long (and short) 'u' and 'U-Umlaut' sounds in German is very often a big problem for learners of German. This is definitely true for native speakers of English and it's similar for Japanese learners. Thus, modelling the pronunciation of all sound in close proximity and with the impetus of producing them as fast as possible is a good way to highlight possible difficulties and help students overcome them. Since students are asked to and encouraged to listen to trial or draft versions of their own oral performance, there is potential for autonomous and self-directed detection and analysis of positive aspects and difficulties in producing German utterances at pace.

Creative podcasting

Preliminaries

Simultaneously with the controlled and scaffolded speaking practice of the tongue twister platform, creative podcasting is used, in order to give freer practice a chance. Students are introduced to producing podcasts themselves in specially run workshops. There the creative potential of the medium is stressed and the emphasis is not put on oral accuracy. The focus in the creative podcasts task is on the creative usage of the spoken language and fluency to a more limited extent. Accuracy is purposefully left aside and a focus on this side of oral proficiency is openly discouraged. Also, reading out aloud is discouraged, in contrast to the VB exercises. The rationale behind this is, that even learners with lower levels of proficiency often are at their best, when using the language uninhibitedly and freely on a topic of their own choosing. The medium of podcast allows subsequent editing, if for instance the student is of the opinion there are too many hesitations or if a genuine mistake shall be eliminated. Similarly, re-recording is an option. In contrast to live presentations in class, podcasts allow students to work at their time and pace without enormous amounts of pressure.

Especially less confident students benefitted a lot from this. The assessed oral component in the Core Language 1 module at Leeds used to be one presentation per semester, counting at 10% towards the overall year mark each. The new podcasting component now substitutes the presentation in semester one. Thus, students are allowed to grow in confidence throughout the year, completing the podcasting task in semester one. And then towards the end of semester two a live presentation in class follows. Didactically this works very well. On top of such considerations, podcasting also allows for a number of other characteristics lacking in most traditional in-class presentations. The scope for collaboration is a lot higher. Groups of up to five students are allowed. In order to get all students involved equally, a way of marking was devised where upon grading the submitted podcast, tutors give a grade according to the Leeds marking scheme. The grade is then multiplied by the factor of the number of participants. The students are presented with their average grade and they are given access to the multiplied number of credits. If they feel some other group member's contribution was lacking and insufficient, they can then, upon consulting all group members, reallocate the grades accordingly. In two years this option has never been made use of. Rather this somewhat peculiar way of grading seems to work wonders on motivating students to participate appropriately and fairly in group work.

Student podcast production

Some excellent pieces of work have emanated from the two years that creative podcasts has been compulsory in the Core language 1 module at Leeds. Especially, those using role play and making full use of the fact that you do not have to be yourself in the podcast showed great potential. There have been documentary type podcasts as well as a number of fully-fledged fictional approaches to widely varying topics. The most common format has been the group discussion or interview scenario.⁴ This has also shown to be the most suited format to practise speaking freely with mere prompts as clues. The basics for all podcasts is quite simple: have an introduction and state the topic, present participants (real names or fictional identities) and wrap everything up at the end and finish off with a greeting. The main rationale behind this fairly simple model, which isn't always adhered to by students in the actual contributions, is to give the listener as much of a reason to listen and to guide them through what they are listening to. The maximum length for podcasts is set to 3-5 minutes. Individuals or groups of two are asked to stick to around 3 minutes; larger groups could go a bit beyond that up to about 5 minutes. Research on the attention span of adult listeners shows, that the shorter is indeed the better (Nickerson: 2010, 70f). This is especially true, when it comes to amateur pieces of audio - notwithstanding whether learners of the TL or native speakers produce them.

On top of practising their language skills students taking part in the podcasting exercise also improve their organisational, technical and team working skills. Often students comment that they enjoy the tasks particularly because it means they are doing something different and fun. Cane & Cashmore (2008, 150f) very positively describe the motivational effect and benefit for students achieved through exercises where students actively produce podcast content themselves.⁵

⁴ Please find examples of the podcasts produced at <http://kernsprache.podspot.de/>. From an earlier extra-curricular project run at Leeds this podcast shows even more creative usage of the TL German <http://deutschsichtig.podspot.de/>.

⁵ Beyond the scope of the current project there is also a lot of Web2.0 potential in involving students in producing podcast content. Materials developed by students may be used by other students, re-used

Topics and ideas

Many students produced pieces of audio immediately concerning their own life as students. Topics like that are very easy to come up with and they even share inherent qualities very important in the design of any task-based learning (TBL). The produced podcasts cover a wide range of topics. Some students chose topics covered in other German modules to be at the core of their submission. Several groups chose topics from the German past: in particular the divided Germany of the Cold War era as inspirations for their podcasts. This is creatively exploring language by enacting pieces from a country's history - with a twist. Two students faked a discussion between West Germany's Ex-Chancellor Willy Brandt and his GDR counterpart Erich Honecker. A group of three students used audio clips from the time around the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to kick off a fictitious discussion between a German from the East and the West respectively, set in 2009. These three students in particular demonstrated that the medium podcast or audio can give a powerful and very creative voice even to the most insecure student. Two from that group had been very reluctant to use their spoken German in class and they benefited greatly from the podcasting experience. Naturally, they also gained in confidence and even showed a little bit of pride due to the good grade they received subsequently. That is TBL as it should be.

Evaluation of the project

General and technology-related issues

Both the tongue twister platform and the creative podcasting task worked well and above expectation. Students flagged no substantial problems up with either the recording devices or the software used for editing in the case of the podcasts. The preparatory workshops consequently appear to have sufficiently prepared students for the process of finding and selecting a topic, tackling TL vocabulary and required phrases, to plan the entire speaking project, to record it, to edit it, and to polish and finish off the product in the end. Similarly, there were very few issues with the tongue twister platform. In the academic year 2008/2009 some initial software problems with the wholly Java-based VLE and VB had to be solved. In the second year of the using the two-tiered model at Leeds, no severe technological problems were encountered. In both years it took students a little while to get into the swing of things with the tongue twisters and poems. In the academic year 2009/2010 newly introduced audio-visual on demand workshops, available to all students at all times, on how to use the VB in detail further assisted a smooth early phase of students starting to use the technology. For students finding out and exploring what the tongue twisters and poems are designed to help them with practically took a little more time. Initially, students often seemed to record their first time reading of the text. With more feedback on the VB and general feedback in lectures the effort put into the tasks by students increased at least for a fair percentage of students. The feedback was seconded and aided by some limited instruction in German phonology and some aspects of phonetics helpful to learners of the language in lectures for the entire year group.

with new year groups and students can even be given tasks where producing specific content for other students is the explicit goal.

Module evaluation

The Leeds two-tier model was part of the regular evaluation for all modules at the University of Leeds 2010. Out of 82 students, 67 submitted a response via the VLE. Since the podcast merely substituted the previously required live presentation in class, no specific data on the acceptance of the creative podcasting speaking tasks was gathered. The anecdotal evidence in general comment sections was largely positive. Some students, however, remarked that allegedly too much time was spent for preparation of the podcast. Since the goal from the outset has been and remains, to offer as many speaking opportunities and incentives outside class as possible, this has to be regarded as a success rather than a real problem. Unfortunately, the model did not succeed in encouraging more use of the TL as a meta language for planning, discussing, and giving feedback. What had been achieved in an extracurricular podcasting project previously, could thus not be repeated.

Positives and statistical data

With such a large year group of students no high expectations had been raised regarding the use of the TL as the meta language. Neither was it ever an expressed aim of the project. Wherever the TL is used as a means of communicating about the task at hand as well as for completing the task itself, this is warmly welcomed. Regarding the VB, the use of the TL as feedback language for the tutors is an integral part of the entire make up of the exercise. When asked whether students deemed the VB tasks helpful, they replied as in Fig 4:

I found the compulsory Zungenbrecher exercises helpful:	
Multiple Choice Answers	Percent Answered
Strongly agree	4.545%
Agree	31.818%
Partly agree and partly disagree	38.636%
Disagree	18.182%
Strongly disagree	6.818%
Unanswered	0%

Fig 4 Acceptance of VB exercises

These figures show that around 45% of 67 students found the exercises helpful or very helpful. Close to 40% agreed at least partly that the tasks had been helpful. However, about a third of students did not agree and evaluated the exercises to have been unhelpful. The vast majority of students was happy and content with the kinds of exercises they had been asked to do using the VB. This is also mirrored in some comments made in a general section of the module evaluation. The comments appear as they did in the original by the students themselves:

„Die Zungebrecher finde ich gut – eine lustige Herausforderung, was mich zwingt, meine Aussprache und Betonung zu üben.“

„Ich finde die Zungenbrecher ein tolles Idee und es macht Spaß.“

„Meiner Meinung nach sind die Zungenbrecher eine geniale Idee, weil ich finde sie lustig, obwohl manche diffizile sind, besonders wenn sie länger sind.“

The fact that this feedback had not been specifically asked for, makes the comments even more encouraging. These students clearly enjoyed the task and the comments even display a fair understanding of the rationale behind the exercises. Some students that were not sure about the usefulness of the exercises initially said the following:

„Zunächst habe ich die Zungenbrecher ein bißchen langweilig gefunden. [...] Jedoch genieße ich jetzt die Zungenbrecher sehr viel, weil sie eigentlich ziemlich nützlich, interessant und kömisch sind.“

„Jetzt denke ich dass die Zungenbrecher sind tatsächlich nützlich, am Anfang war ich nicht ganz überzeugt.“

And even a student who did not enjoy having to complete the tasks on a weekly basis found positive things to say about them:

„Ich mag die Zungenbrecher nicht, aber es ist klar ersichtlich dass sie nützlich sind. [...]Aber wenn ich das erste und letzte Zungenbrecher höre, kann ich ein Unterschied hören. Ich glaube ich habe mein deutsche Akzent verbessert.“

This comment displays a clear sense of development in the student’s oral performance in German. There were many more comments noting a positive trend in their spoken German. Overall, the feedback is very heartening indeed.

The Zungenbrecher tasks:	
Multiple Answers allowed	Percent Answered
helped me to improve my pronunciation in German	47.727%
helped me overcoming my reservations about speaking in "public"	15.909%
were fun and interesting to do	59.091%
introduced me to new genres of German literature	15.909%

Fig 5 Positives of the VB

In Fig 5 students commented on what it was they thought made the VB tasks worth their while. Multiple answers were allowed. Nearly half of all students felt the exercises had helped them with their pronunciation and oral performance in German. Almost 60 % stressed that the tasks were above all an entertaining and fun kind of exercise. This is a very interesting result indeed. The factor fun appears to be very important and should under no circumstances be left aside by language teaching professionals. A high acceptance of tasks equals a high motivation to engage with the tasks at hand. Something most language teachers would agree they are continuously striving to achieve.

Criticisms to be considered

Not everybody was entirely satisfied with everything and some of this feedback even points out weaknesses of the project already identified in this article:

“More feedback on the Zungenbrecher and Logbuch would have been better as most weeks none was received, and some weeks they weren't checked at all.”

This student thinks more feedback should have been received. For the tongue twisters as well as the simultaneously run study log. Students had been repeatedly told about the mode of receiving feedback roughly every three weeks. However, the goal of increasing student autonomy by getting them to use a study log clearly did not achieve all its objectives, if tutor feedback subjectively still plays such a central role for them. As mentioned before, a peer feedback component could potentially have remedied this situation. This is something that definitely needs to be looked into more closely in the future.

“zungenbrecher's are silly and the hardest thing about them is trying to find a pc or laptop which accepts the programm.”

The second student’s comment refers largely to problems with technology that could not always be solved entirely satisfactorily. This is a serious point indeed. If even

university equipment does not always guarantee students smooth access to tools provided, the use of such technology needs to be reviewed. After all, the University of Leeds offers much in terms of technology available to students and staff. The computer facilities are plentiful, fairly state of the art and with the VLE the university offers a lot of (licensed) software packages to its users. Where such resources are not readily available, some of the components presented here today, may not or only to a limited extent be employed successfully. However, particularly in the form of Moodle there are now free alternatives available to teachers, students and institutions. The big advantage of having a central VLE, which also requires students and staff to use it, is the relative familiarity with using many tools on a regular basis.

Summary and conclusion

The project presented here may be considered a success insofar as additional speaking and oral performance tasks outside class could be offered to German students at the University of Leeds. Both the VB and the creative podcasting components were well received and integrated into the running curriculum relatively smoothly. However, the amount of time spent on implementing the project for the module coordinator and other tutors alike was considerable. Especially, in terms of giving extra feedback and dealing with new pieces of software, the tutors on the course had to contribute beyond the classroom, as did the students. The workshops that were run for introducing the creative podcasting element are time-consuming. But by and large, the effort spent by the module coordinator and some other tutors as assistants has to be regarded as well worth and justified. Students showed considerable ability to pick up the format and produce some excellent audio podcasts themselves. These students went on to produce similar tasks in the following years and thus the workshops were even more worthwhile by enabling students to use it for more than a mere task on one module. Many of the skills acquired by students and staff engaged in the project are highly transferable and will most likely benefit them in many different ways in the future. Implementing the VB, however, requires a little more than absolute beginner skills with VLE technology. At the end of the day technological obstacles are always possible to overcome, where the methodological and pedagogical groundwork has been done. It is not about technology and using it for its own sake. It is about using technology well and using it in novel, enriching ways.

„Using technologies just for the sake of using them, and thus transcribing the learning material from one medium to another, is not a matter of bad vs. good use, but an inappropriate, and if you want, an ugly, use (misuse) of learning technologies.“ (Dror 2008, 222)

In terms of fluency gains and improved pronunciation, some individual progress could be observed. Since no formal and statistically verifiable study went along with the specific oral proficiency outcome for the individual student, there still remains a lot to be done. The case study and action research scope of the project limits its findings to some extent. The project went well by all accounts and even acceptance figures by students have to be ranked as high. However, a closer examination of measurable learning development in terms of enhanced oral proficiency remains to be conducted.

An important outcome of the project is the strong motivational factor of the fun nature of tasks. This aspect renders the outlined speaking and pronunciation exercises very easily adaptable in many contexts. Creative podcasting may be used with students virtually anywhere there is some access to computers or recording devices. A lot of

work has been done in recent years on fine-tuning tasks for audio and video podcasts by (language) teaching professionals worldwide. The Leeds example shows that even relatively open tasks are accessible to students and yield a lot of potential for TL use outside class. The VB exercises are somewhat harder to reproduce when no VLE is available. But making use of tongue twisters and poems as pronunciation and fluency exercises are by no means impossible without such software. Offering speaking opportunities outside class, however, requires some kind of technology support as in the VB presented here.

Creative podcasting can thus be seen as having a low threshold to be used by others elsewhere. The threshold for the VB tasks is somewhat higher. But it allows a lot more specific, directed and guided exercises at the same time. It thus addresses very different aspects of fluency and oral performance. It is an expressed goal for the author to repeat components of this project with university students even in Japan. Some creative podcasting has already been used very successfully with students at a private language school in Shibuya. Results and findings of that project will be presented in writing shortly.

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Morten was educated in Germany, Ireland and Sweden. Before Japan he worked in England. For many years he has been using audio applications with students.

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