

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

**Connecting language learners with the community:**

**A library outreach project for children**

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## **Connecting language learners with the community: A library outreach project for children**

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This article presents a small community outreach project in which undergraduate learners of German taught two sessions of German to children at the local library. The article explains the design of the project and the individual lesson and summarizes a small research project that analyzed the effects of the project on the undergraduates. Specifically, effects on undergraduates' language skills in the area of vocabulary were investigated as well as their perceptions of the project. Furthermore, this article provides concrete suggestions for implementing similar projects.

### **1. Introduction and Background**

Foreign language instruction at the elementary level in the US continues to decline. In 2008, only 25% of elementary schools offered foreign languages while this number was still at 31% in 1997 (Pufahl & Rhodes 2011). This number is in stark contrast to European countries, where most children start learning their first foreign language at the age of 6 and start another foreign language at the age of 10 (EACEA 2012). In 2015, more than 80% of elementary students were studying at least one foreign language in Europe (Eurostat 2015). Benefits of language learning are especially high at a young age. Research has shown that early exposure to languages has a positive impact on brain development (Garcia-Sierra et al. 2011) and working memory (Morales et al. 2013). It also helps young learners to perform better in other academic areas including math and reading (Armstrong & Rogers 1997; Stewart 2005). Early language instruction further fosters a positive attitude toward other languages and cultures (Larson-Hall 2008) and can increase students' motivation while also leading to stronger foreign language proficiency (Boyson et al. 2013; Kissau et al. 2015). Learning languages early has a myriad of further positive effects. Children, for example, learn how to take on other perspectives which can lead to the development of effective communication skills (Fan et al. 2015). Early immersion programs have also been shown to promote cognitive development in children (Nicolay & Poncelet 2015). Understandably, quantity and quality of

early foreign language instruction greatly affect outcomes and more contact hours or immersive programs may be necessary to achieve desired results (Jaekel et al. 2017).

In spite of the declining foreign language offerings at the elementary level, there is a general consensus about the importance of educating multilingual US citizens. In their 2013 White Paper, Abbott and colleagues outline a vision of language learning that encompasses all sectors of the US educational system. The report hopes that the US can achieve “nation-wide acceptance of the teaching of a second language to a growing population at all levels of the education system, starting early with K-12, with universal and equal access to language learning opportunities throughout the United States” (Abbott et al. 2013: 4). The report recommends exposure to other languages and global awareness for grades PK-6, a goal that aims to provide 100% of learners at the elementary school with access to language learning.

Similarly, a 2017 report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, titled *America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century* specifically calls for an increase of language teachers at all levels, “so that every child in every state has the opportunity to learn a language in addition to English” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2017: ix). The 2007 MLA Report, likewise, calls for deep translingual and transcultural competence of all students (Geisler et al. 2007).

Rubio (2018) suggests that the best way to achieve the ambitious goals of providing access to languages for all is through large dual-immersion programs that are state-funded. Nonetheless, it will take a long time until enough of such programs exist to provide all children with high-quality language learning experiences. In the meantime, smaller projects can help to introduce children who don’t have any access to foreign language instruction at their schools into the world of other languages and cultures. This can be done through a variety of service-learning and community outreach initiatives (Kraemer & Schenker 2012) including, for example, language camps (Kraemer & Schenker 2011), weekend events, or weekly language classes for pre-schoolers and children (Schenker & Kraemer 2018b), after-school enrichment programs or library literacy events (Schenker & Kraemer 2018a).

The present article summarizes one small community outreach project that can easily be implemented by others as well. The article summarizes the rationale for the project, explains how it was implemented, and presents findings from a small research study investigating the effects of the outreach project on the undergraduate participants’

vocabulary knowledge. Feedback from participants on the project will also be summarized and suggestions for implementing community outreach projects will be provided.

## **2. Rationale**

In line with the goal to make languages and cultures accessible to all children in the US, a small outreach project was designed for children in the community. Through this outreach project, undergraduate students at a small private university in the Northeast of the USA worked with children at the public library and introduced them to German language and culture. The project served the dual purpose of exposing children to another language and culture to which they may otherwise not have access, as well as engaging undergraduates in a small service-learning opportunity. Multiple benefits have been found for community outreach and service-learning projects. For example, it can help undergraduates better understand social justice and lead to increased tolerance (Eyler et al. 1997). It can also serve to promote democratic values (Vogelgesang & Astin 2000) and help students develop critical thinking skills (Grim 2010). When combining community outreach and service-learning projects with language instruction, several positive effects have been noted for students. For example, De Leon (2014) shows how students can develop intercultural competence in service-learning projects involving immigrant and refugee families. Caldwell (2007) shows how these projects allow students to use the target language for authentic purposes. In her service-learning course, Spanish learners participated in the library's Hispanic Heritage Month. Guglani (2016) suggests that this can even help students overcome insecurities about communicating in the target language. Through these types of engagements, students have an opportunity to improve their language skills and depending on the type of project and curricular integration they can also acquire course content (Wehling 2011). Further benefits of service-learning and community outreach for students are summarized by Eyler et al. (2001) in their large-scale analysis of studies from 1993 to 2000. These include: positive effects on personal and interpersonal development, communication skills, reducing stereotypes, citizenship skills and commitment to service, and career development, to name a few. Research has also outlined ways in which service-learning can benefit universities, for example by improving the relations between institutions of higher learning and the community (Gascoigne 2001) and by strengthening the relation-

ships between faculty and students (Caldwell 2007). Furthermore, positive effects have been found on student retention and likelihood to graduate from college (Astin & Sax 1998).

### **3. Overview of Outreach Project**

Due to the myriad effects of service-learning and community outreach on all participants, a small project was developed to connect undergraduate learners of German with children in the community. The project consisted of two 60-minute language and culture sessions at the public library. In order to implement the project, the instructor of German collaborated with a representative of the library, who served as Young Minds and Family Learning Librarian. Offering the language sessions at the library as opposed to a space on campus had several reasons:

- (1) Access to child-appropriate space: The library has rooms specifically designed for children which contain tables, chairs, craft supplies, as well as enough space for children to run around and play.
- (2) Reaching many children: The library is visited by children from diverse backgrounds and even without signing up for the sessions it allows children to attend the language programs if they happen to be at the library at the right time. If the program were to be held at the university, it would prevent children from participating whose parents weren't aware of and signed them up for the program. In order to reach as many children as possible, the public library is an ideal space.
- (3) Support with advertising: The library has email lists through which they can distribute flyers for the programs and they also have bulletin boards in the library to advertise. This helps with recruiting participants for the programs and reaches a wide audience. Librarians were also willing to help with the design of flyers for the program and supported the planning stages of the outreach project.
- (4) Location: The public library is centrally located in town and easy to get to for everyone. A location on campus that families are not familiar with may prevent some from attending.

Before the sessions were implemented at the library, volunteers were recruited from the university to help with these events. Undergraduate students learning German were invited to serve as volunteers. The e-mail invitation was sent to all students enrolled in

German courses and received a great response. A training session was then conducted to inform students of the project and explain the lesson plan to them. Volunteers signed up for one of the two sessions that were held at the library.

In order to allow children to choose the time that best worked for them, two sessions were offered on different days and times. The content of the two sessions was the same. The goal of the 60-minute sessions was to introduce children aged four through twelve to some basic German language vocabulary. The sessions were playful in nature and included a song, game, and craft in addition to learning new vocabulary about greetings, animals, and colours. The following section is a brief outline of the 60-minute session:

1. Greetings and farewells: After all children are welcomed and the instructors and undergraduate volunteers are introduced, children learn how to greet one another in German. The undergraduate volunteers model the selected phrases and a poster with images supports the teaching of the greeting vocabulary. Children are encouraged to repeat the new phrases together. Once the phrases are introduced, volunteers use a soft ball to play a small review game. All children stand in a circle and the volunteer tosses the ball to one child saying one of the previously taught phrases. The child responds and gets to toss the ball with a new question or greeting to another child.
2. Introduction of animal vocabulary: The main content of the lesson is on animal vocabulary. Animals are a fun topic because most children like animals and there are a lot of crafts and games that can be done on the topic. The volunteers introduce the words for the animals that have been selected for the session by showing large images or stuffed animals of the word to be taught. The children are encouraged to repeat the word. Once all words have been introduced, the volunteers show random images and see if the children remember the words. Children are then asked if they know the sounds these animals make. Since the German sounds are quite different from the American ones, children often find this very amusing. To wrap up the new vocabulary learning, the song *Old McDonald has a farm* is sung together with the children in German. This song was selected because most children are familiar with it, so singing it in another language is easier. If an undergraduate volunteer can play the guitar, it is nice to accompany the song that way. Alternatively, a recording can also be played.
3. Introduction of colours: Returning to the images of the animals, the volunteers now introduce colours. They show the animals and have the children review the words

and then proceed to asking what colour this animal is. In this way, the introduction of colours is combined with a review of the animal vocabulary.

4. Craft: The children get to make a mask of their favourite animal. The volunteers help them choose from a variety of options and the children first colour their mask, then cut them out and attach a string to them so children can wear them. As they colour, the volunteers review the vocabulary for the colours with them.
5. Review of animal vocabulary: In order to review the newly taught vocabulary, the children play a memory game with the images of the animals that were taught in which they have to name the animal they uncover each time. For older children, worksheets are provided on which they can trace the words of the animals and match the correct word to the images.
6. Farewell: When the lesson is done, volunteers return to the greetings vocabulary from the beginning of the session and say farewell to the children.

The session was purposefully designed to be simple so children of all ages could participate. Additional worksheets were prepared in case older children wanted to attend so these could complete more challenging activities. Approximately fourteen children between the ages of 3 and 13 participated in the two sessions. Some children came late and some had to leave early, so that not all fourteen children experienced the entire 60-minute session.

#### **4. Methods**

A small research project was conducted to assess the effects of the outreach project on the learners of German who volunteered to assist. The project aimed to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of participation in language outreach program on students' target language vocabulary skills?

RQ2: What are students' self-perceived learning effects from participating in a language outreach program?

RQ3: What do students perceive as benefits of the language outreach program for the children?

In order to answer the research questions, students completed a vocabulary test at the beginning of their training session and after they completed the outreach project. They also completed a post-survey that asked for their feedback of the experience. The vocabulary test consisted of 23 items, 12 of which were pictures of animals which had to be labelled and 11 were images of items of which students had to write what colour they were. The post-survey consisted of eight multiple-choice and three open-ended questions and was collected anonymously through Qualtrics.

Thirteen undergraduate students participated in the project but complete pre- and post-data for the vocabulary test was only available for seven. All thirteen completed the feedback survey. The volunteers were undergraduate students and learners of German in 2<sup>nd</sup>-semester through fifth-semester courses.

## 5. Results

### Research Question 1

Due to the small number of participants, only descriptive statistics will be presented. The vocabulary test showed that students increased their knowledge of animal and colour vocabulary as can be seen in figure 1. When scoring the items, students received two points for the animals: one point for correct noun and one for correct article. Misspelled nouns received 0.5. The colours received 1 point if they were correct and 0.5 if they were correct but misspelled. Especially with the animals, it can be seen that students did not know many of the vocabulary items prior to the library session. However, because only seven students completed the vocabulary test, no definite conclusions can be drawn.

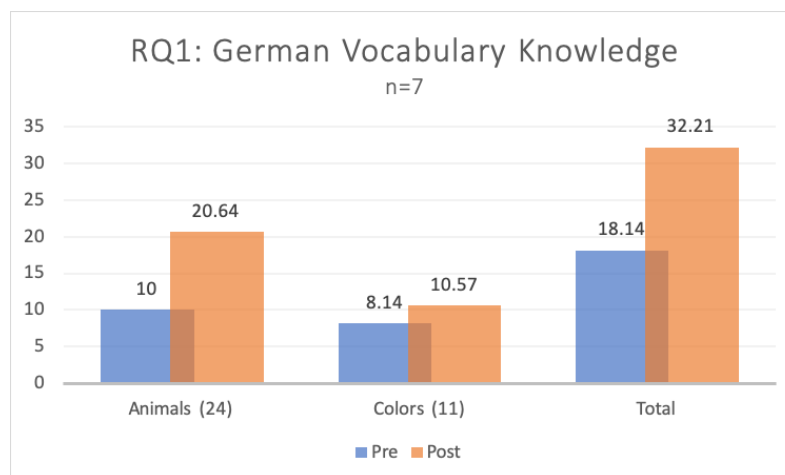


Figure 1: Vocabulary Knowledge



**Research Question 2:**

All thirteen volunteers completed the feedback survey and most students saw some beneficial effects of the outreach project on their language skills. 61% felt that the experience had contributed to their language learning a little, and 8% thought it had contributed a lot. 23% of students did not really feel that their language skills had changed and 8% saw no effect at all.

**Research Question 3:**

Students were also asked how they perceived the impact of the project on the children who participated at the library. Overall, they noted several positive aspects of the project for the children, including the acquisition of knowledge, sparking children's interest, gaining awareness of difference, learning vocabulary, gaining confidence, learning about culture, and having an enjoyable and fun time. One student noted that the project "improved their confidence and gave them an afternoon of enjoyment, and another wrote: "I think it gave them a good opportunity to learn about a language that they would have otherwise never encountered on their own." Students also indicated on the post-survey that they themselves had benefited from the project by learning "how to teach German", "ways of engaging with children", and how to "help children enjoy learning languages", in addition to learning animal names and colours. The feedback for the project from the volunteers was overwhelmingly positive.

Further findings from the post-survey showed that the volunteers would be willing to help with such a project more frequently. 46% of respondents indicated they'd be interested to participate once a week, and 16% would be willing to help out once a month. Overall, students enjoyed working with children in this outreach project. 54% enjoyed the experience "a great deal", 31% indicated they had liked it "a lot". No one disliked the project.

**6. Suggestions for Implementation of Outreach Projects**

Conducting two 60-minute sessions at the local library was a worthwhile endeavour for the German instructors and undergraduate volunteers and an enjoyable experience for the children. Even though children only received a glimpse into another language through the project, it still allowed them to experience another language and become aware of

the linguistic diversity of the world. Anyone interested in establishing a similar outreach project might find the following suggestions a useful starting point.

Suggestion 1: *Find a space in the community that is easily accessible for children.* If the library is not an option, perhaps there are other community spaces that are frequented by many families that can be used for the project. A space that is already designed for children is ideal.

Suggestion 2: *Collaborate.* Collaborations with the library or other spaces can have many benefits as summarized before. They may have craft supplies, access to printing, email lists to distribute promotional materials, etc. In the current project, working with the library meant that the instructors did not have to purchase any craft supplies so that the cost of the program was minimal. Collaborating with university programs can also be a good option if funding is needed. Different centres across campus may be interested in being a sponsor to such an event, such as the Office of International Students and Scholars, for example.

Suggestion 3: *Involve undergraduate and/or graduate students.* Students are eager to use their language skills outside of the classroom and including them in these projects not only eases the workload on the instructor it also makes the outreach project a dual learning experience for both the children in the community and the participating student volunteers. More advanced students can help with the design of materials and lesson plans and even beginning language learners can contribute with ideas and support at the actual events. This also helps to create a community of learners and can increase departmental visibility across the university.

Suggestion 4: *Pick easy topics to be taught.* Depending on the scope of the outreach project, the topics to be taught to the children should be fairly simple. Animals, colours, and greetings, which were chosen for this project, worked very well. Other topics that can be used include numbers, items of clothing, the house/my room, foods, or the seasons. It is difficult to predict how well children pick up on the material, so it is always best to have a few back-up activities in case everything gets done sooner. A few games that always work well include memory, bingo, or the fly-swatter game<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, images for colouring are a good back-up activity as well.

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<sup>1</sup> In this game, images are hung on the wall. Two teams play against each other. The instructor calls one word and the first child of each time tries to touch the correct image with the fly swatter. Then the child goes to the back of the line and the next child gets a turn.

Suggestion 5: *Include a variety of activities.* In order for children to remain engaged, it is recommended to vary the type of activities. Including games, songs, dances, crafts, worksheets, and different types of learning will ensure that children are motivated and get the most out of the session.

Suggestion 6: *Don't reinvent the wheel.* While it may sound daunting to create a session for children especially for instructors who typically don't teach this age range, there are a myriad of ready-made lessons and worksheets available on the internet. A quick google search often reveals many options that can then be adapted to the specific context and program.

Suggestion 7: *Include other languages for a semester-long project.* Another project that I have conducted at the library was called "Discover our world". In this project children were introduced to a different language and culture once a week for a total of eight weeks. The goal of this project was less on language learning and more on learning about different cultures. This project is easy to set up because every week a different presenter is in charge. For this to work, volunteers from different language departments at the university were recruited. Both undergraduate students, graduate students, and international students participated to give children a glimpse into their culture. Cultures and languages that were presented included: German, French, Russian, Turkish, Swahili, Spanish, Italian and Chinese. The 60-minute sessions were designed by the instructors themselves but they were assisted by the project coordinator (the author of this article). Instructors were encouraged to divide their lesson into four parts: (1) A power point presentation about the culture and typical things about the country. This could include food, clothing, important places to see, or anything else the presenters would like to share with the children about their culture. (2) Teaching children how to say some simple things in the target language. (3) Making a craft that is related to the culture or the new words that were taught. (4) A game, song, or dance that is related to the language or culture. This semester-long project can be a great way to connect the university with the community and allow children to learn more about the diversity in the world.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of the small research project have to be interpreted cautiously because of the small number of participants. Nonetheless, they point to the overall positive effects that

even a small outreach event can have on all participants. Undergraduate volunteers were able to use their language skills outside of the classroom in an authentic setting that taught them new skills – such as how to engage and work with children – and was perceived as a valuable experience by all. The fact that students would be willing to volunteer more frequently shows their enjoyment of and motivation for such projects. While this library outreach event was designed as a pilot project, the positive outcome of this small project suggest that a longer duration could be feasible for future semesters. The successful collaboration with the library could become the basis for a more sustained project in which basic language skills can be taught to children and cultural awareness can be promoted. Due to the relative ease of establishing small projects such as the one described in this article, it is the hope that the ideas presented here can be taken up by others for setting up and conducting more outreach projects for different languages and in different parts of the world.

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### Author biography

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### Keywords

outreach – vocabulary – service learning – community