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Using News Podcasts to Develop Listening Comprehension Skills in German

Rationale:

The German news service *Deutsche Welle* produces a daily news podcast for German language learners, *Langsam gesprochenen Nachrichten* (LGN). Items from the daily international headlines are slowly read and clearly articulated to give learners time to process new - and sometimes unfamiliar - information in real time. The target audience is proficiency level B2-C1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Students can subscribe to the news feed or download an MP3 file of the broadcast. A complete transcript of the news podcast is published the following day. Improved listening comprehension lays the foundation for increased communicative and presentational proficiencies as students become more knowledgeable about current events in the German-speaking world.

Description:

The use of authentic content is critical to the development of all language proficiencies (reading, writing, listening and speaking), but requires intensive scaffolding to ensure comprehension. The LGN component lends itself well to the criteria for Comprehensible Input: a clearly defined academic task, visual support, connecting to previous knowledge or global concepts, and spoken language at a normal tempo. The LGN broadcasts are slower, but do not sound unnatural or manipulated.

Because many of my students reference only a very small pool of news sources on a regular basis, I first have them complete an introductory assignment so they can familiarize themselves with some of the important German-speaking news media organizations. They complete a short survey of news content on three different sites (one per country), and then make some observations about content differences between the German and English language pages from the same news organization. Students post their responses in a discussion thread. The learning outcome is that intended audience has a real and discernable effect on content.

When beginning a new topic area, students typically brainstorm vocabulary and phrases associated with a visual stimulus in small groups. In this phase, they connect previous learning to a new topic. This builds confidence when they realize they can describe the picture even without specialized vocabulary. At the end of the task, students are asked to list three to five vocabulary items they need to know. The pooled group list is assigned as homework and becomes part of their personal dictionary.

Clearly defined tasks help students focus on selective listening and a successful outcome, rather than being overwhelmed by everything they "don't know." They are encouraged to use the same selective listening skills that are essential in everyday interactions in their primary language.

An initial listening comprehension activity first asks students to listen to the entire podcast then characterize each news item by place (country, city or region) and category (domestic politics, European politics, world politics, economics, culture, sports, etc.). This can be a matching activity or free-response activity: „Sie hören nun die (#) Meldungen der *Langsam gesprochenen Nachrichten* der DW von gestern: Versuchen Sie erstens den Namen der jeweiligen Stadt zu entschlüsseln, der jeder einzelnen Meldung vorangeht und zweitens jede Meldung einem übergeordneten Themenkreis zuzuordnen.“

The next listening comprehension phase requires students to summarize the content in one sentence or to create a new headline. Initially, this might simply be a dictation of the headline, working towards formulation in the student's own words in subsequent weeks as they become more familiar with vocabulary and European news issues. Comprehension of content and details are measured by multiple choice, T/R or "List three facts."

Individual news items can also be used to practice specific aspects of language learning such as verb tense, word order, use of adjectives, adverbs and descriptive clauses, or indirect speech. The benefit here is the application of defined vocabulary or grammar structures in an authentic context. For example in a cloze activity, students are directed to fill in missing numbers, verbs, topical vocabulary or idioms.

The long-term learning outcome for listening comprehension based on *Langsam gesprochene Nachrichten* is for students to summarize and present news content in their own words either orally or in writing. Mastery can be documented in multiple forms and can be directed by the student's preference or interest. For example, students are asked to listen to the news for a week and pick a developing storyline to present in a group discussion (summary and personal reflection) or as a presentational text (news article, letter to the editor, speech, flyer, etc.).

Appraisal:

Students have made gains in listening comprehension since I started including news podcast activities in the last half of the semester. They have been generally enthusiastic about the use of news content for vocabulary building, grammar practice, and focused listening tasks. This was reflected in their unprompted incorporation of news content in discussion posts and in their final presentations.

Drawbacks to consistent use of LGN in the course is that students sometimes lack background or context for news topics and developing listening comprehension activities is time consuming.

References:

- *A 21st Century Skills Map for World Languages* (<https://www.actfl.org/resources/resources-2020>)
- "Auditives Beobachten: Konzentriertes Zuhören trainieren," Ideenbörse Unterrichtsmethoden Sekundarstufe, Ausgabe 2015/2016, Olzog Verlag (PDF).
- Deutsche Welle *Langsam gesprochene Nachrichten* (<https://www.dw.com/de/deutsch-lernen/nachrichten/s-8030>)
- Hadley, A. O. *Teaching language in context*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle, 2001.

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