

Peter Lenz, Malgorzata Barras

Does teaching chunks and fluency make a difference in migrants' language learning?

Results of an intervention study in intensive German courses for adult migrants

Abstract: A quasi-experimental study involving over 150 adult migrants in 12 beginner's German courses explored the consequences of a chunk-based and fluency-oriented teaching approach. The findings suggest that, overall, such an approach can be successfully implemented. An interesting pattern emerges from the language test results (pre- and post-tests): more fluency and less accuracy gains for the experimental classes in oral language use; no differences on the written test sections. The Trade-off Hypothesis and the "ballistic" nature of automatized chunks of language may provide explanations.

Résumé : Une étude (quasi)expérimentale portant sur 150 migrants adultes répartis dans 12 cours d'allemand pour débutants a passé au crible les effets d'un enseignement par *chunks* (formules) et axé sur l'aisance à l'oral. Les conclusions laissent penser que, globalement, ce type d'approche peut être mis en œuvre avec succès. Les résultats des tests de langue (pré-tests et post-tests) ont permis de faire émerger un modèle intéressant : une plus grande aisance et une précision moindre à l'oral dans les classes expérimentales ; aucune différence à l'écrit. La *Trade-off Hypothesis*, ainsi que la nature « balistique » des *chunks* automatisés sont proposés pour expliquer les résultats obtenus.

1 The study

In the Swiss context, newly arrived adult migrants often start learning the local language (e.g. German) in so-called low-threshold language courses. Often, a considerable proportion of the course participants have limited experience with school-based learning, particularly foreign-language learning. As a consequence, teachers of such courses frequently experience problems that arise when activities from the textbooks explicitly focus on language structures and

Peter Lenz and **Malgorzata Barras**, Research Centre on Multilingualism, Fribourg, Switzerland, E-mail: Peter.Lenz@unifr.ch, Malgorzata.Barras@unifr.ch

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forms (e.g. use of grammar rules). However, widely available and accepted methodological alternatives seem to be rare.

The objectives of the present study were (1) to develop and implement a teaching concept, including a corresponding set of materials, that offers a methodological alternative for low-threshold German courses; (2) to explore the acceptance as well as perceived advantages and disadvantages of the concept; and (3) to compare classes using the alternative concept with classes using the more conventional approach taken by the official textbooks with regard to a number of language learning outcomes.

The alternative teaching concept chosen (i.e. our *intervention concept*) builds heavily on the Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993; Lewis 1997). The Lexical Approach favors language learning through *chunks*, i.e. multi-word lexico-grammatical units, partially with open slots (e.g. “I’d like ...”). It does not include the type of obviously problematic activities mentioned above. In particular, no explicit grammar instruction is to take place. Moreover, we complemented the set of chunk-oriented activities with regular (daily) fluency practice (Nation and Meara 2002) in order to ensure that the lexico-grammatical elements learned would be accessible to the learners for communicative use. Two frequently used textbooks were adapted to correspond to this approach, and then reprinted and distributed to the experimental classes.

A quasi-experimental design with an intervention and a control group (IG/CG) was implemented in order to enable valid comparisons. A total of six class pairs (twelve classes, subdivided into six pairs of classes, each pair formed in a principled fashion at the same school) worked their way through an entire textbook. One class of each pair followed the intervention concept, the other class served as a control and therefore used the original textbook and followed a concept that largely reflected the intentions of the original authors. The concepts and materials for both groups had an equivalent form and were introduced and accompanied in a comparable fashion.

At the end of the intervention, the teachers of both groups were interviewed to gain insight into the acceptance of the teaching concepts and their suitability for the target group, and to better understand the specific features of the teaching and learning processes in both groups.

In an initial examination (that took place before the second half of each beginners’ course started), and a final examination (pre- and post-test), various written and oral language skills and competences were measured.

2 Results

The interviews with the teachers suggest that both concepts can be applied to good effect overall. Some learners in the IG with experience in school-based foreign language learning, as well as students specifically interested in improving accuracy, missed grammar instruction and exercises. Most learners in the IG considered fluency training a good learning opportunity, once they were used to it. According to the teachers, the IG concept is more suitable for students who have had less formal schooling, while the CG approach better meets the needs of students with more school experience. Teachers in the IG sometimes missed having a grammatical metalanguage at their disposal to identify and correct errors. Also, they found it unsatisfactory that they could not sufficiently intervene during the daily phases of fluency training due to class size because they feared that the frequent repetition of incorrect language, which they observed, might have undesirable effects.

The results on the item-based written examinations and on the (oral) elicited imitation task (Erlam 2009) were scaled using the Rasch model. This made comparisons between the results on the four test forms possible, which overlapped only partially (two forms adapted to two different textbooks for use on two occasions). The indicators calculated for spoken fluency could be compared directly, as they were based on the same oral production task. For statistical inference, a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted.

When evaluating the various test sections, data from slightly different numbers of participants were available. Of the 153 students who entered the second stage of the course, 141 participants could be successfully tested in at least one test section, 129 of these in all test sections.

The results on the skills and competences that were tested generally indicate an improvement between the initial test and the final test, with few exceptions on some fluency measures: the *articulation rate*, i.e. the number of syllables per second in those stretches of spoken production in which the speaker actually produces sounds, remained unchanged for either group. However, with regard to the two fluency indicators that include the sounding parts as well as the silent pauses (*speech rate* and *pruned speech rate*),¹ increase depends on group membership. Progress from time 1 to time 2 is observed for the IG but not for the CG. The corresponding difference in progress between the two groups is significant

¹ Speech rate: number of syllables per second of the total speaking time including all pauses; pruned speech rate: basically identical to the speech rate, but syllables in filled pauses, repetitions, and self-corrections are not counted.

at the 95% confidence level. When all three fluency measures are viewed together, it can be concluded that learners in the IG were able to (or simply *did*) produce speech with less planning and self-monitoring leading to pauses than learners in the CG. The results from another oral test section that was based on the elicited imitation technique, show that for the IG, progress in fluency is accompanied by less progress (than the CG) in the accuracy of morphosyntax and lexical form. In terms of function and content, the results on the elicited imitation test reveal no differences between the two groups. The same is true for the areas tested in the written test section: neither the integrative measure taken by means of a C-test nor the morphosyntax items showed differential growth for the two groups during the experimental phase.²

3 Discussion and conclusions

Based on the teacher statements from the guided interviews, it seems in order to conclude that the first objective of the study, developing and implementing a teaching approach, including materials, that builds on the Lexical Approach and a focus on fluency, was reached. Despite the fact that feedback on the intervention concept was predominantly positive, it met with some criticism from teachers and some of those learners who had different expectations due to previous experience in school-based (language) learning. One specific point in question was grammar teaching. Some IG teachers and learners would advocate at least some explicit dealing with grammar. Learners with a weaker educational background reportedly liked the lack of explicit grammar teaching because this reduced the learning load. What conclusions concerning this matter can be drawn from the test results? The results on the written test section give no reason to think that the intervention concept might hinder the development of learner grammar. But how should the clear group difference regarding grammar (and accuracy more generally) in the oral test section be interpreted?

Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan 2009) can provide a possible explanation. The basic tenet of this hypothesis is the generally recognized condition that our cognitive capacity is restricted; specifically, the capacity of our working memory and our attentional capacity are both limited. As a result, competition arises between complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) in spoken language pro-

² It should be noted that on the entry test that was administered before the second half of the German course, the CG *tended* to attain better results than the IG. The measured distance between the two groups basically remained the same on the final test.

duction. Complexity should not be an issue in our context as the test tasks were guided to a large degree. Neither accuracy nor fluency was explicitly asked for in the elicited imitation and the description (i.e. the spoken production) tasks. Given this leeway, it appears plausible that the learners chose to put emphasis on those aspects of their language production they usually focused on in class. If this is the case, the observed group differences may be attributed to performance rather than competence, at least to some extent.

The “ballistic” nature of automatized language as described by Segalowitz and Hulstijn (2009), could form the basis for an alternative explanation. As mentioned above, several intervention-group teachers observed critically that often faulty language was repeated over and over again in fluency practice activities. Frequent repetition could make chunks of language readily available which are not quite accurate. Under the relative pressure of the elicited imitation task, the learners might simply trigger such elements without monitoring and correcting them due to the “ballistic” nature these elements have taken on through automatization. The storing of deficient chunks of language as relatively stable and easily recalled pieces of procedural knowledge is arguably not desirable.

While the CG had better results with regard to oral grammar and accuracy, the IG was superior when spoken fluency (speech rate) was considered. Fluency is a key area of language competence, especially when it comes to oral language use. Therefore, it needs to be carefully developed, just like other areas of language proficiency. In this respect, the conventional approach could be improved.

Overall, the observations made in this project speak in favor of more balanced learning opportunities in either of the concepts. On the one hand, the findings indicate that the teaching concept in the IG requires at least a stronger emphasis on the accuracy of the chunks that are to be automatized. This does not necessarily have to be in the form of systematic grammar teaching but implies some kind of stronger emphasis on forms – possibly simply greater insistence on the accuracy of the target chunks that are actively learned and also practiced in fluency training. On the other hand, it appears that a conventional concept like the one used for the control group should be complemented by regular fluency training. Furthermore, it seems that both concepts should (re-)consider what (essential) grammatical terminology and linguistic concepts and forms they should introduce using explicit teaching methods. Internal differentiation in the classroom could further help optimize the amount of explicit teaching and focus on form(s) for different types of learners.

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