

# **A Scaffolded Approach to Overcoming Unconscious Competence**

## Digital Learning Tools in the Intermediate German Curriculum

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In my intermediate German 2 (fourth semester) course in the 2016 fall semester, I was confronted with a problem, which probably all college instructors have faced at some point in their career: What I believed to be the most interesting topic of the whole course – an in-depth discussion of the Syrian refugee crisis, its effects on German society and politics, and how it is represented in German media – ended up causing a fair amount of frustration both for my students and me as the instructor.

The cause of frustration can best be described as what the scholarship of teaching and learning<sup>1</sup> has called »unconscious competence.« Unconscious competence refers to the highest stage on a progress continuum towards developing mastery in any given field of expertise. A learner who has reached this level of mastery not only has acquired all necessary component skills of her discipline, she also has internalized the procedural knowledge, in that she knows exactly when and how to apply the component skills. In fact, a learner at this stage utilizes her knowledge and skills without being aware of the complexity of interconnected processes that are required to fulfill more advanced tasks.

Unconscious competence thus describes an expert's blind spot in recognizing the challenges a less skilled learner faces in completing a task that to the professor, the expert, requires little effort. Learning how to drive is a simple every day example for this disconnect between novice and master learner. For someone who has been driving for a long time, the different aspects of safely maneuvering a car have become an automated process, about which the master driver does not have to think: Shifting gears, checking blind spots, holding cruising speed, checking the mirrors, using the blinkers. What to the master learner has

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**1** | See for example Susan Ambrose et al.: *How Learning Works. Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Jossey-Bass 2010.

become second nature is still a chain of discrete steps for the novice learner, steps that individually and in combination pose a difficult cognitive challenge.

In the specific case of my class, there was a series of assumptions based on my unconscious competence that made the unit on the Syrian refugee crisis less rewarding than both my students and I had hoped. For one, I assumed that the students all had a solid understanding of the history of both the Syrian war and the European refugee »crisis.« Based on this assumption, I did not spend enough time covering these basics, basics that would have been crucial for better understanding the newspaper articles we subsequently discussed. Secondly, and more crucially, when selecting the articles, my three primary goals were to find articles that covered interesting aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis, articles that presented a broad variety of viewpoints, and articles that are accessible linguistically for the students. I did not, however, think carefully enough about one important aspect: namely, how I would guide students, step by step, from wrestling with basic challenges of understanding the articles over forming first opinions about the topics to engaging more critically with the viewpoints in longer writing assignments. That is, my failure of accounting for the many intermediary steps between first reading a complex article and talking or writing about it became somewhat of a hindrance to the full learning potential.

In this essay, I discuss how I approached this unit on the Syrian refugee crisis when I taught it for a second time, early in the 2017 spring semester. Not surprisingly, at the heart of my redesign was a stronger focus on scaffolding. Scaffolding, simply put, means that a teacher temporarily relieves some of the cognitive load for students while they are completing a task, so they can focus on a specific dimension of learning. For example, if the goal is to identify the thesis of an article, scaffolding could take the form of vocabulary glosses to aid students' understanding of the text, a crucial pre-condition for the higher order task of distilling the author's main thesis. Scaffolding, however, in a broader curricular sense also meant for me to provide students with more low-stake opportunities to engage with any of the articles in speaking, reading, and writing. That is, by creating a sequence of tasks and assignments that all built on one another, students were slowly guided towards the task of writing an analytical essay about the portrayal of the refugee crisis in German media. For example, we practiced writing an introduction, we learned phrases that can be used for plot summaries, and we discussed expressions for posing or opposing an argument. These intermediary steps honed students' component skills required for the successful completion of an analytical essay.

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on three specific scaffolding elements, which provided students with more systematic guidance in their exploration of the Syrian refugee crisis's representation in Germany media, while at the same time helping them to sharpen and refine their linguistic skills. What all three strategies have in common is the use of different digital tools – some specifically designed as learning platforms, like ActivelyLearn, and others that have

been appropriated for educational purposes. I first discuss my approach to digitally responding to students' daily reading responses, and how that digital approach helped them acquire a better awareness of grammatical areas, on which they had to work more. This strategy was employed in direct response to my students' struggle in the fall semester to handle the different components of a critical analysis successfully. By providing early targeted feedback on component skills of the larger assignment, students were more successful in completing the critical essay. I then explain how I used the online platform ActivelyLearn<sup>2</sup> to extend the time students spend discussing a complex article on the Syrian refugee crisis beyond the classroom, since students in the first iteration of the class complained that they did not have enough time to adequately engage with the articles in depth if the conversation is limited to in-class discussions. Lastly, I elaborate on how collaborative writing enhanced not only students' writing skills but also their critical thinking. This last scaffolding strategy allowed students to better understand the complexity of writing, and the importance of multiple revisions. All in all, I show how a scaffolded approach enhanced by digital tools increased students' time on task, and how it provided them with a variety of channels outside of class through which they engaged with the complex topics.

## DAILY READING RESPONSES MEETS IPAD PRO AND APPLE PENCIL

While the subtitle of this section might read like an endorsement of Apple's latest tablet, my goal here is to comment on the benefits of creating a digital archive of annotated student work, in an effort to help them create a plan of action for improving their grammatical accuracy through continuous, targeted feedback on their writing, combined with moments of meta-reflection on their learning progress. In this fourth-semester course, students are asked to respond to, what I call, ignition questions in preparation for every class. Those questions serve a dual purpose: As the name suggests, they are meant to ignite students' thinking about the articles we would discuss the next day. On the language level, these writing exercises allow students to experiment with structures and words they might need to express their thoughts. The ignition questions thus present a low-stake environment for students to test and challenge their language production skills before they must discuss the topic in class.

In the first iteration of the course, I only gave students feedback and corrections on their responses to the ignition questions when they asked for it, since I wanted this exercise to be free of the »fear of getting a bad grade.« However, in reflecting on the students' improvement in terms of their writing during that first semester, I realized that the daily writing exercises would also present a productive way, both for me and the students, for tracking their progress, and

<sup>2</sup> | Online www.activelylearn.com.

making them aware of grammatical areas, in which they still need more practice. The second iteration of the course also coincided with my acquisition of an iPad Pro with the Apple Pencil, a responsive, Bluetooth-enabled, active stylus. I thus decided that I would start annotating student work digitally on my iPad: Students submit their responses to the ignition questions as PDFs, I would annotate their work, and then put it into individual folders in Google Drive where students could access my corrections and annotations.

While I first only made the decision to digitally annotate their work (rather than using pen and paper) in an environmentally-conscious effort to save paper, I soon recognized that there was a significant learning benefit to this method as well. Since I used Google Drive to share the annotated work with students, they suddenly had an electronic archive of their written work, together with my feedback. That is, there was an archive of writing assignments over time that would allow them to track their own progress as a writer of German. Once I realized the pedagogical potential of this archive, I started asking students to go through my corrections, and compile a list of their most common mistakes. The task was to create a checklist they would use to correct their own future writing, based on prior mistakes they made. And secondly, I asked them to monitor if they improved over time with regard to certain common structural errors. While I do not have enough data to make statistically significant claims, I can safely say that students, on average, have become more aware of their own grammatical weaknesses, and the work they now turn in shows that a conscious reflection over time on their writing based on instructor feedback does aid their learning.

This new approach of responding to their daily writing led to a significant improvement for the unit on the Syrian refugee crisis. By receiving targeted, continuous feedback on their written engagement with the topics, students were able to complete the different tasks that culminated in the writing of a critical essay more effortlessly. By the end of the unit, they thus felt like they had »mastered« the task of writing a critical essay about this specific topic, while at the same time having made more general progress in their language skills. The digital annotations and reflections also allowed me to work with each student more in depth on their personal, individual weaknesses, something that is not always possible in class. Therefore, the digital annotations of their homework, in fact, turned into one-on-one opportunities of mentorship and learning.

One might ask if the same results could also have been achieved with traditional pen and paper annotations. In theory, I believe that is true. However, based on my experience, most students would not create an archive of their annotated work with the same care and reliability if they were handed back paper copies. Secondly, most students also, as digital natives, prefer to store and access their learning materials online. By providing them with feedback through channels of communication and in environments (the digital) that closely mirror their everyday modes of knowledge production and consumption anyway, student learning happens more seamlessly.

## EXPANDING TIME ON TOPIC – COLLABORATIVE GROUP READINGS WITH ACTIVELYLEARN

As pointed out in the introduction of this essay, another aspect I wanted to improve in the second iteration of the Syrian refugee crisis unit was to provide students with more time on task. Intermediate German at my institution meets only three times a week for 50 minutes. I usually budget about two weeks for each one of my six thematic units, so that we have roughly 300 minutes per topic. I realized that this class time alone is not sufficient to both guide students through different tasks and exercises of increasing cognitive complexity with the goal of having them complete a major writing assignment at the end of the unit, while at the same time also just giving them enough time to grapple with the topic.

Therefore, I turned to the online platform [www.activelylearn.com](http://www.activelylearn.com) which allows instructors to upload texts and create interactive reading assignments for students. For example, it is possible to insert questions into an article, questions that guide the students' reading, and which help them to better understand the text. A significant benefit of this feature is that students cannot continue reading unless they engage with a question, and submit a response. The instructor, then, can see all the students' responses, and thus already gauge where most of them struggle. However, ActivelyLearn also introduces a social, community aspect to the reading experience. The platform allows students to pose questions to each other and add comments to the text. Those questions could be anything from asking for the meaning of a word, to requesting help with the understanding of a whole passage. The comment function can be used to alert others to an especially interesting sentence, or to highlight a paragraph that is very challenging. In a nutshell, students already start engaging with each other, discussing the text, before they even come to class. ActivelyLearn also has a 'flagging' function, which allows students with one click to flag a question the instructor posed, or a word, a paragraph in the text, as confusing or complicated. These flags, then, allow the instructor to identify passages that she might need to focus on more in class.

This spring, I used ActivelyLearn for the initial reading of an article that linked the Syrian War to issues of climate change. In the fall semester, this article caused a lot of frustration due to its complexity, and the lack of time in class to address all the interesting points adequately, while also making sure students understood it linguistically. By offloading some of that work to the digital realm, our class discussion was much more focused, and basic questions of understanding had already been answered. Furthermore, the students enjoyed the fact that they were able to engage with each other asynchronously, and at their own pace. This exercise helped the instructor to better anticipate where students

needed the most help in understanding the article, and it also showed me what topics interested them the most.

ActivelyLearn is an excellent tool to expand the time students spend with the class materials, and in this case, it effectively added at least an hour of interactive time to the unit. While they could have also spent an hour reading the text by themselves, they would not have benefitted from the exchange with their peers while tackling a complex article. It is probably also safe to say that they would have missed out on some interesting aspects covered by the author. Since every person comes to an article with different interests, reading it together allows students to engage with topics they would have missed if their peers had not pointed them out.

## **REAL-TIME COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN GOOGLE DOCS**

It might seem counter-intuitive to have students interact with each other through Google Docs while they are all in the classroom. However, using collaborative writing has many benefits for the students' progress in writing German; but first, some explanations are in order. Collaborative writing in this context means that all students work at the same time on a single piece of writing using a shared Google Doc. In the case of my class, we had just talked about the activist project »Flüchtlinge fressen«<sup>3</sup> (Eating refugees), whose goal it was to force the German federal government to charter a plane with 100 refugees from Turkey to Germany to allow them safe passage. Since the project was rather controversial not only in Germany but also in our class, it triggered strong emotional responses in our class. In order to productively channel these emotions, we decided to draft a letter (in the style of a letter to the editor) to the organizers of the project, in order to share our class's response to »Flüchtlinge fressen.«

We had already covered the style conventions of such a letter, and now the task was to start a first draft, as a collaborative writing exercise. Google Docs allows multiple users to edit and write in the same document simultaneously, accounting for all the edits and additions that are being made. At first it may seem quite chaotic once text just starts to appear randomly all over the page, but there are some major benefits for this form of writing. First, there is a sense of accountability, in that everybody will need to contribute to the process in some way, since Google Docs shows who has made which edits. Secondly, collaborative writing provides an element of instant peer correction and review, since everybody is able to correct the writing of others. Thus, collaborative writing, in fact, is also a process of collaborative editing, and thus one of collaborative negotiation of grammatical accuracy. The students, in other words, are teaching each other about grammar through their corrections. Thirdly, collaborative writ-

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**3** | Online [www.politicalbeauty.de/ff.html](http://www.politicalbeauty.de/ff.html).

ing, in my experience, leads to a stronger progression in students' analytical and critical thinking. By combining the brain power of multiple people, the depths of their writing improves significantly over texts created by individual students.

Lastly, one of Google Docs' features also helps students to better understand writing as a process that requires multiple stages of revision in order to produce quality work. Since Google Docs allows to highlight all the changes that have been made, effectively switching between earlier and later stages of the writing process, students realize that the final product, in our case a strongly-worded, well-structured letter to the organizers of »Flüchtlinge fressen,« often bears little resemblance to the first draft. Based on that experience, students started to understand that they also need to allow time for revisions when completing writing assignments individually.

In this essay, I have reflected on three digital tools that helped me with the scaffolding of a thematic unit on the Syrian refugee crisis. These tools allowed me to give students both multiple instances of goal-directed practice, as well as targeted feedback. And due to the digital nature of the tools used, I was also able to expand time on task, and students' interactions with each other. Together, these benefits helped me overcome what I introduced as »unconscious competence.«

The implications of my insights, however, extend beyond this one thematic unit, and, in fact, beyond this course and disciplinary boundaries more generally. When employed strategically, digital learning tools can add a layer of complexity to class discussions, since they allow instructors to ease the cognitive load of challenging tasks by creating new spaces and channels for students to engage with the topic at hand, as well as with each other.

