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## **ACTING OUT, SHAKING IT ALL ABOUT:**

### **Getting physical movement into the Languages classroom to get the language out of boys**

*How does the use of kinaesthetic activities develop and enhance the engagement and achievement of boys in the study of German?*

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In the latter part of 2010, an action research project was undertaken at a boys' school in Western Australia involving two Year 9 German classes with a total sample size of twenty five students. The research question under investigation was *how the use of kinaesthetic activities would develop and enhance the engagement and achievement of boys in the study of German*. Kinaesthetic activities were used specifically because boys at this school tend to choose elective subjects that are by their very nature more tactile, to the detriment of enrolments in foreign language classes. Over the course of four weeks (twelve lessons), three different kinaesthetic teaching aids were introduced: AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) signs, TRIBES activities and Verbo-Tonal techniques. The boys were excited by the prospect of being involved in a research project and found many of the components interesting and engaging. They enjoyed in particular the opportunity to work actively and collaboratively in the TRIBES component, stating that while gestures and Verbo-Tonal techniques were interesting, they brought little benefit to them personally. It is significant to note that given the opportunity to become more physically active in the classroom and work socially, engagement in lessons increased. In some pre- and post-testing on vocabulary learning, the gestures component also increased their achievement. These two combined are surely a harbinger of students choosing to continue with their language studies into the post-compulsory senior years.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This action research aimed to investigate how the use of kinaesthetic activities would develop and enhance the engagement and achievement of boys in the study of

German. Observations at the school and a range of literature suggest that boys become more engaged and more encouraged to achieve when they can interact with the content of a subject in a physical or tactile manner. Utilising observations of student engagement and motivation in subjects that are by their very nature more tactile, such as sports, drama or woodwork, it was decided to investigate the effects of introducing these tactile elements to a foreign language classroom.

In the context of this investigation, student *engagement* was considered to be extended time spent giving prolonged attention to class activities, a reduction in distracted or distracting behaviours and an increased willingness to participate actively in tasks. *Achievement* was considered to mean the students' own perceived increases in learning, as well as objective testing measures that evaluated students' scores in a given assessment pertaining to language learning.

It is difficult to motivate boys to study a foreign language as a subject beyond the compulsory years, especially in an all-boys' context and within a country where a foreign language seems to have little relevance to both students and parents. A report for the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council for example, found that only 15% of parents and only 26% of students believed that Australian people thought that foreign languages formed an important part of the school curriculum (McConchie Pty Ltd, 2007).

At my school, languages fall into the 'electives' category from Year 9 onwards and are thus not in the 'core', or compulsory category. When it comes to choosing an elective subject in Years 9 and 10, the boys generally choose subjects in which they have opportunities to learn in a tactile manner, visually and kinaesthetically and are thus perceived as more 'fun'. The boys are not eager to choose an elective subject that has similar demands of academic rigour as a core subject. A review of literature relating to learning styles revealed that this is the case globally, as boys prefer kinaesthetic learning (Mariash, 1983). Perhaps its use is valid in the foreign languages classroom, too.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wide body of literature that suggests that boys prefer kinaesthetic and tactile learning experiences and learn better from them (Mariash, 1983). Renstak (1979) suggests there is a correlation between active participation and the way in which boys' brains work. This led me to ponder *how the use of kinaesthetic activities would develop and enhance the engagement and achievement of boys in the study of German*.

Kinaesthetic activities then, include activities that require the student to engage in a manner that goes beyond a didactic, 'sit on your chair, listen and take notes' approach. For the purposes of my IBSC Action Research project, I have decided to limit the parameters of kinaesthetic activities to: gestures (Gregersen, 2009), *the Verbo-Tonal* approach (Guberina, 1970 – as cited by Orton, 2007), and game-and-play-based activities as suggested by King (2006) and Gibbs (2001).

While these approaches may seem extensive and difficult to evaluate in isolation, they are all linked to the idea of kinaesthetic activities, aiding in the evaluation of their efficacy in developing and enhancing students' engagement and achievement in the study of German. I modelled gestures, using signs from the official Australian AUSLAN signbank, as the classroom teacher when explaining or giving instructions. The Verbo-Tonal approach developed by Guberina (1970) suggests that students benefit from walking, humming or tapping in time to the prosodic pattern of speech, useful perhaps in 3+ syllable words, or when learning where the vowel stress in a word ought to be placed. He suggests that improvised gestures aid in the acquisition of correct pronunciation and intonation, in that they match the target tension or voice contour. Gibbs (2001) suggests in *Discovering Gifts in Middle School*, that game and play based activities allow for structured and physical student interaction and peer learning and aid retention of learned concepts. This is largely achieved by creating a caring environment and involving students in a curriculum whose content is delivered both in an active, as well as a student-centred manner.

Using the studied literature and applying individual aspects to my German classes in the form of an action research project and evaluating their effectiveness, I set out to determine to what extent kinaesthetic activities are useful in Year 9 German classes.

## **CONTEXT**

This IBSC research study took place at Christ Church Grammar School, a private boys' school in Claremont, Western Australia. The school has enrolments of approximately 1500 students; 480 in the Preparatory School and 1020 from Years 7 to 12 in the Senior School. The school is non-selective in its intake of students, in that it does not require boys to pass an entry test. Classes are not streamed and so there is a large mix of abilities present in each lesson.

In the preparatory school, boys have taster courses in Chinese, Japanese, French and German, leading to a choice of one language which is compulsory to continue in Years 7 and 8 in the Senior School.

## **WHY ACTION RESEARCH?**

Action research is the process of critically evaluating one's practice in order to improve it. It demands that the practitioner – the person engaging in action research, in this case a teacher, critically evaluate his work by doing research on his own work in the form of self-reflective practice. While it does not demand a fixed hypothesis (McNiff 2002), it does demand a systematic investigation into one's own behaviour (ibid) in order to improve the outcomes one wishes. It involves identifying a problem or issue one wants to improve and then going about improving this situation. According to McNiff (2002) this entails "imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it and changing [one's] practice in the light of the evaluation." (p. 4).

While the action research is implemented, it is also important to gather data, which can then be turned into evidence. While the predominant choice of data is qualitative (McNiff, 2002; Waters-Adams, 2006) quantitative data also has its place. (Waters-Adams, 2006)

For these reasons, action research is an exceptionally useful strategy for teachers wishing to bring about positive change in their own classroom practice. It provides teachers with the tools to transform their reflections, thoughts, observations and notes into a rigorous and clear presentation of their findings that are open to discussion and assessment.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

As part of my research, I utilised pre-surveys, during surveys and post-surveys. I also held a focus group discussion, as well as keeping a teacher's journal.

## **INTERVENTION**

AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) was the first strategy employed. I signed the key words and concepts covered during lessons on the topic of cities. As students offered their ideas, I repeated their contributions and signed the relevant sign, before encouraging the students to practise both the new word and its sign. The students and I repeated the words and signs encountered throughout the topic and access was given to the AUSLAN signbank on the Internet to search for other signs. Students then presented descriptions of their suburb or town to the class orally, accompanied with AUSLAN signs.

Subsequent lessons in which AUSLAN was utilised saw the use of gestures and signs expand to finger spelling of words to accompany their gesture, gestures for the gender of a noun (masculine, feminine or neutral) and a gesture for the type of plural of a noun (vowel change, added "n", added "en"). After a few lessons to give students the opportunity to master some of the gestures learned, the final gesture/AUSLAN activity was a round-robin reading activity in which each student had the opportunity to read two sentences from a short story, incorporating learned gestures for words.

TRIBES activities as outlined by Jeanne Gibbs in *Discovering Gifts in Middle School* (2001) formed the second part of the intervention. These activities, while being largely kinaesthetic in nature, also link in with a number of Gardner's other Multiple Intelligences. In order for these to be successful, it was necessary to introduce and agree upon four ground rules. All members of the class had the right to pass and participate, that a sense of mutual respect was necessary and that the students listen attentively to each other.

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The rules were discussed in English to ensure understanding. An energising game called “*links, rechts*” (left, right) then introduced the first kinaesthetic activity, which involved students moving from chair to chair until a change of direction was called. This activity necessitates listening attentively to commands and moving in such a way as to allow the student in the middle of the circle of chairs the chance to sit down, thereby allowing all students to participate equally and strengthening the validity of the four ground rules.

A subsequent activity involved playing a version of “celebrity heads” in which students had to work out what type of city structure or activity they were, using only yes/no questions. The follow-up to this activity involved writing creatively about the structure in German and reading and simultaneously signing their description.

In another lesson, we played an adaptation of “I love all my neighbours who...” In the original, a member of the class stands in the centre of the circle and might say in German: “I love all my neighbours who... have blond hair.” All those with blond hair must then stand up, cross the centre of the circle and find a free chair. The standing member in this time attempts to take possession of a free chair, leaving one member standing who then continues with another phrase. The variation was that an element of suburbs was introduced. For example a student might say “*Ich liebe meine Nachbarn, die einen Fluss haben.*” (I love my neighbours, who have a river.) Those with a river in their suburb then had to cross the circle and take a chair.

The final TRIBES activity utilised in the course of the intervention was an adaptation of Gibbs’ “Live Wire” activity (2001). Students used jewellery wire to describe their home, and then how they got to school each morning. One example included the shape of a small home with trees, connected to a bicycle shape, connected to waves to represent the path along the ocean, connected to the shape of a bell to signify school. Once completed, students had the chance to tell a short story in German about where they live and how they got to school each day.

The third type of kinaesthetic intervention was the Verbo-Tonal method developed by Guberina (1970) as described by Orton (2007). The emphasis in these activities was on the improvisation by students of gestures, taps, claps or steps to help them learn

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the stress of vowels in certain words. The idea was introduced to the students in the first week of the intervention. In this lesson I explained the theory behind the method and demonstrated by conjugating the verb 'haben' (to have) by using a rhythmic palm on thigh slap. I emphasised that this was just one way in which the method could be employed and that it may be different for each individual student.

Students were then given the opportunity to find a quiet place for themselves somewhere on campus for ten minutes, where they could modify the method to suit themselves. Outputs included the clicking of fingers, tapping on desks, marching on the spot, stomping feet and conjugation from memory using a sing-song voice. In most cases students were able to retain the verbs and recite them without the use of the flashcard for backup. Due to the unpopularity of this method and students' unwillingness to continue trialling this method, it was only tried in the first week and not thereafter.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

My sample classes included 25 boys (12 in one, 13 in the other) in Year 9 (ages 13-14), the first year in which the study of a language is not compulsory. All students had studied German in the year before and those who had come from Christ Church's Preparatory School had also studied some German before then. Others had come from different feeder primary schools and had had some form of second language education, though not necessarily German.

The syllabus for Year 9 German at my school is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Level A1.2, which surpasses in content and complexity of grammar the West Australian Curriculum Framework requirements for the study of languages at Year 9 level. We use DaF (German as a Foreign Language) text- and workbooks imported from Germany and all lessons are conducted using the Immersion technique where the teacher speaks nothing but the target language, although students are encouraged to assist each other in either the target language or in English. There is an equal focus on the four language skills of: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in preparation for the 2AB and 3AB Course Syllabi for German mandated by the West Australian Curriculum Council for the final two years of German studies at high school level.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

I used a number of different data gathering methods in the course of this research project. I used written surveys, both qualitative and quantitative, as well as vocabulary tests before and after a particular component of my intervention. I filmed lessons focussing both on my methodology as well as on the students' performance and I asked an informed colleague to conduct an after-school focus group discussion with a randomly selected sample of students, which was filmed. My colleague provided me with a coding manual to use in order to code students' responses to open ended questions. I further utilised these codes to group students' responses during and after the intervention. The coding was informed by Bourque (2004) and Lockyer (2004).

Surveys were anonymous, but traceable based on students choosing for themselves a *unique* symbol, code, word or other identifier that allowed me to trace the change in any given student's perception of their engagement or perceived achievement.

Focus group discussion allowed students to voice their opinions on facets of learning a foreign language and German in particular, explain how they went about it practically, predict how certain teaching methodologies would support and encourage them and give feedback on the different types of interventions. The discussion was filmed, transcribed and coded.

Vocabulary tests before, during and after gave a clear indication on each student's regular achievement in the study of new vocabulary and how kinaesthetic activities helped their learning and retention of vocabulary.

During the intervention I also kept a teacher's journal of ideas and field notes, which informed my intervention formatively. That is, as I noted how different aspects of my intervention seemed to work, I adapted them continuously in order to make them more effective in subsequent lessons.

## **METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

For this project, I utilised a mixed method approach of data collection and analysed this data both statistically and by coding responses to qualitative student responses.

This allowed me to triangulate my data sets. In practice, this meant that I surveyed students before the intervention to record perceived enjoyment of types of activities. This then informed my choice of specific activities to utilise during the intervention. The surveys were both closed scale-type questions, as well as open-ended questions. Further surveys relating to each different type of intervention activity were implemented during class time immediately upon completion of a type of activity and then read over by me in their entirety after day's end. Scanning the scale-question tick-a-box responses gave me a clear indication of how students enjoyed certain elements of the intervention and to what extent and was already giving me a good overview. Reading through the written responses to open-ended questions gave me a further source of information that informed the way in which I was going to implement the next intervention activity.

Quantitative data were entered into Excel tables, utilising a coded version of the students' self-created unique identifiers as the identification and then counted using Excel's 'countif' function to group the number of responses in each category of "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" or "strongly disagree". These responses were also condensed further into the broader categories of "generally agree" and "generally disagree". Percentages are not particularly useful in a sample size of 25, so numbers of students were used when reviewing data. Qualitative data were coded using a three-letter-code coding, which uses acronyms to code students' responses to questions about the intervention's TRIBES, Gesture or Verbo-Tonal Components' Benefits and Disadvantages, used throughout as TCB, TCD, GCB, GCD, VCB and VCD. These, in conjunction with the results from my quantitative data sets then formed the foundation on which my results were analysed and discussed.

A number of students' responses are quoted in the analysis and discussion section, which is a way of showing readers the voice of students and also allowing for greater clarity and openness to my research.

## **RESULTS**

My key findings were that:

1. The TRIBES component of my research was the most effective element in enhancing students' engagement in our German lessons;
2. While students did not find the Gestures component particularly engaging, they *were* useful in increasing the students' achievement, inasmuch as they had better retention and recall of vocabulary accompanied by a Gesture; and
3. The Verbo-Tonal component was abandoned as it was unpopular.

Prior to the intervention, quantitative baseline data were obtained using a survey which asked students to reflect on the type of activities and learning styles they felt suited them. As my intervention focused directly on kinaesthetic activities, it was interesting to note that the survey did not show an enthusiasm for the idea of moving around to interview others or to match up vocabulary. This conflicted with another survey in which students claimed to choose other elective subjects because they were more "hands-on".

The activities the boys enjoyed were the TRIBES activities. *"The first TRIBES introduction went a treat: [...] Feedback was overwhelmingly positive."* When I asked the boys in a survey during the intervention period, 20 of 22 indicated that the TRIBES activities were fun to do and 17 suggested it would help them with their German learning. Unsurprisingly, the reasons many gave were that they had a chance *"to speak much more fluently than [they] usually would"*, *"to use what [they had] learned with others"* and that *"others might know other things than [him] and then could tell [him] that."* It appears boys both really enjoyed the kinaesthetic activities in a lesson, as well as the social / collaborative way of working together.

To measure the efficacy of the kinaesthetic within TRIBES, another hands-on activity involving a piece of jewellery wire was chosen. Afterwards, students were asked to complete a survey, where they were asked to gauge their engagement in the TRIBES activity and the perceived benefit thereof. Of the 25 students asked, nineteen indicated variously that the activity was *"fun"*, *"ladsy"*, *"cool"* or *"engaging"*. Most added further comments, indicated that it would help them better to learn German, because

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*“[...] I was speaking much more fluently than usual”*

*“[...] I get to use what I learnt with others, asking them questions and answering.”*

*“[...] it got me using the old stuff we did in Yr 8 and the beginning of Yr 9.”*

*“[...] it was visual and acting/moving learn which is popular with kids our age.”*

The six boys who indicated a neutral or negative response to the activity, did so by asserting that it was merely “OK, “interesting” or that they “preferred worksheets, because it helps [them] learn better.” While they are in the minority it does clarify that kinaesthetic learning is not for every boy.

In looking at the Gestures/AUSLAN component of the intervention, results suggest that student responses to this were mixed. During the intervention, my perception of student engagement was that they were immersed as many were actively mimicking my gestures during my introductory demonstration of the AUSLAN signs. After my introduction, students then had a chance to practice the signs and most did so. The task of producing a description of their home suburb or town allowed them to research further signs on the online AUSLAN signbank and the majority followed instructions; while some found it amusing to look up AUSLAN expletives instead. This perhaps suggests that boys were intrigued by the novelty of deaf-mute communication, but did not necessarily see the benefit of signs accompanying foreign language learning.

When surveyed after this intervention, 21 of 23 students indicated that they found the gestures for words interesting. Eighteen found it easy to learn the gestures for words. 19 were more likely to remember the words due to the gestures and 13 would find it easier to remember the gender of a noun due to the gesture. While this is encouraging information, the fact that only four students would use the gesture when communicating with a partner, 14 would not look up more gestures at home and only half would use a gesture when stuck, stands in stark contrast to the initial positivity.

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When given the opportunity to suggest how to improve the gesture activity, most students were stumped for an answer. Some suggested it could be improved by:

*“Not having it” (two responses)*

*“Finding a way to remember genders and plurals” (two responses)*

*“nothing” (two responses)*

*“combining them with the TRIBES activities”; or*

*“having times when we use nothing but the gestures”.*

The Verbo-Tonal part of the intervention was not popular. Although boys did attempt to use this system to humour me, they found it embarrassing and unhelpful, so it was not continued.

After the four-week intervention had concluded, my colleague Julie Harris interviewed five randomly selected students from the sample of 25 in the form of a focus group discussion that was filmed. Julie also took transcriptive notes during the interview of each individual student’s response to a range of questions pertaining to the TRIBES, the AUSLAN/Gestures and the Verbo-Tonal components of the intervention.

When asked about how the TRIBES component was introduced by me and to what extent students engaged in this component, all students perceived benefits:

*“Pretty fun – put a circle of chairs in the room.”*

*“Introduced it pretty well – explained it in English so we could understand what we were doing and then went back to German – everyone participates the same amount – it’s not put-your-hand-up – it’s your turn (passed around the class).”*

*“introduced it quite well – telling us in English ..... I always try to participate in all the activities – you do have the right to pass but I try to be involved because that’s how you learn.”*

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*“Pretty well [introduced] – I try to get involved in it – good to get the movement through the class.”*

*“He explained the whole thing well – introduced the four rules – definitely different from normal classroom – no desks but in a circle – more active, no paper and pen involved – just you.”*

When asked about how the TRIBES activities could work in Languages in the long term, students suggested “whiteboard notes” would be needed for the “written aspects” as you “miss out on the reading/writing part of it [the learning of German].” Two students also mentioned that they enjoyed the fact it was “active and you get involved a lot more”, and that it is “interactive and fun”, suggesting certainly that students felt more engaged in the lessons:

The gestures/AUSLAN component was met with mixed responses when asked how effective they thought they were and to what extent they used them when communicating with someone in German. Three students stated that they thought they were either “pointless” or “not helpful”. One student suggested he “wouldn’t be gesturing in Germany”. On the other hand, one student stated the opposite: “If you can’t remember the word, the sign brings it back to you and you can remember what it is [...]” This focus group discussion suggested that the gestures component did little to raise students’ engagement in learning German.

Vocabulary test results, on the other hand, suggested otherwise. After the three lessons including gestures had been completed, students completed a vocabulary test of ten words, five of which had been consistently accompanied by signs and five, which had purposefully not been signed when used in the lessons. On average, all 23 students managed to correctly write 3.73 words that had been signed and only 1.91 words that had not been signed.

These results suggest that gestures accompanying vocabulary aid internalisation and recall.

The questions relating to the Verbo-Tonal component received neutral or negative responses. Two students mentioned that “some people naturally do that - ... but not in

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*a class situation*” and *that “it’s good for music ... doesn’t quite work for German.”* Another student suggested that *“a lot of people learn that way, with some rhythm but [he] doesn’t.”* Another mentioned it *“doesn’t really help for [him]”* and another suggested it *“doesn’t really help to remember the words, [that] the tapping just tells you how many syllables [the words have].”* When they were questioned specifically how the Verbo-Tonal method aided their pronunciation of long and short vowels, one student suggested that it *“sort of helps”*.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the intervention activities yielded mixed responses from students to my action research project as a whole. While the Verbo-Tonal method provided the least amount of enjoyment for students in the project, the Gestures on the other hand seem to them to be most interesting. Overall, the TRIBES component is unanimously voted as the best part of the intervention. Based on my data, students are most engaged in this aspect of the project compared to any other component. Students find it *“fun getting involved”* and *“active”*, which makes it more *“enjoyable than other classes”*. It is difficult to evaluate the TRIBES activities’ efficacy in improving students’ achievements as no single elements of vocabulary or grammar were taught in isolation, rather activities incorporated all the German they knew and were learning. In contrast, while students do not seem to find the gestures as engaging, some quantitative data suggest that they are effective in aiding vocabulary retention and recall

The project has shown that boys respond well when given an opportunity to be active in the classroom and to interact with each other in a structured and guided manner. Based on the results of this research project, students will be given more opportunities to utilise and practise their learned German in adapted TRIBES activities that allow them to move and converse with each other in game or play based situations. It might also be worthwhile allowing my colleagues opportunities to participate in professional learning activities that showcase the TRIBES learning philosophy.

The next time I utilise kinaesthetic activities in my languages classroom, I would most certainly not use any Verbo-Tonal activities in the attempt to improve students’ pronunciation of German vocabulary. While gestures are useful in assisting students

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retain and recall words, its constant use is tiring and at times confusing for students. Certainly the efficacy of TRIBES activities ought to be investigated further. However, rather than focussing solely on their kinaesthetic relevance, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether it is the social interaction, the lack of writing and desks or the sense that something 'different' is being done that attracts boys to this methodology.

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