

Carol Ringhofer's development work
**Strategies to introduce students to
German at age 13**
at Freman College, Buntingford

Carol had been working as a German teacher at Freman College, a 13-18 comprehensive upper school in rural Hertfordshire, since 2004 when she began this development work.

Dealing with students coming from a variety of middle schools meant that Carol was faced with students who began at Freman College in Year 9 with a wide variety of knowledge about the German language. Some had been taught German for a year, while others had only a basic vocabulary; some had never learnt German before. Carol reflected on this situation which had concerned her for some time, and decided to explore ways of tackling this widely varying knowledge base of students in her care, such that all students in her mixed ability classes would be able to make excellent progress.

She began by focusing on lower ability students, but quickly decided to change this when she reflected that all students find some things easier or harder than others and she wanted to facilitate more effective learning for all students. She was determined that no student should come to her lesson dreading it and feeling unable to achieve any progress.

After attending a professional development session focusing on differentiation, Carol trialled some ideas for materials to support students' listening skills (Pachler and Field, 2001). She designed a range of resources which all students could use at varying levels and found that they improved students' confidence and willingness to participate in the lessons. These resources or support sheets took many forms; sometimes a question and answer sheet, sometimes a description of a writing task, sometimes instructions for a conversational activity. Carol realised that any differentiation she used would have to be created specifically for her own students' needs and that this required a flexible problem-solving approach that could respond to students encountering difficulties.

Having used specific support sheets, Carol found that students achieved good marks, were able to recognise key words and, in addition, were able to identify and use some new verbs in the infinitive. This was a positive start and generated enthusiasm for both Carol and her students. She felt it was important that she was giving support sheets to all students, not just some, as this changed students' attitude to working with the resources.

Spurred on by this success, Carol continued to develop support sheets in response to student need. She found that they were being used by more able students to extend their writing and develop phrases, while less able students were able to produce a sustained piece of writing but without just copying. When she moved on to a new topic, Carol noticed that her students' ability to listen out for key words was much improved: additionally, their test scores were rising, leading to greater confidence and self-esteem. For an end of topic reading and writing assessment, Carol produced support sheets which provided students with the opportunity to gather vocabulary and prompt ideas. These acted as a writing framework, and despite being very simple, were effective in enabling students to produce sustained pieces of their own writing.

It was interesting that, once the routine of using support sheets had been established, Carol was then able to target specific students with sheets designed specifically for them. These were accepted willingly, with a positive effect on progress, behaviour and motivation. She was becoming more and more convinced that the use of such support materials was leading to increased student participation and motivation.

Pausing to evaluate

Having sought parental permission, Carol decided to ask a mixed ability group of students – some with no prior knowledge of the language – for their views on their German lessons. She used a semi-structured interview technique and the thermo-evaluator technique (McCabe and Horsley, 2008) to focus the discussion. This was an enriching meeting which gave her important insights into how her students perceived their learning. Their views on the use of support materials were very positive, achieving high scores on the thermo-evaluator. They felt confident in the four skill areas of the subject and made it clear that they were enthusiastic to learn and enjoyed the challenge of learning German. Carol was pleased that her work was enabling students to access the language but also not

making the work too easy for them. Her students provided detailed feedback on what worked for them in her lessons and Carol found this to be the most rewarding part of the process.

Carol was pleased when her work was given more formal recognition by being an agenda item at her department meetings. This gave her opportunities to share strategies with colleagues and gain more ideas from them. One good idea came from English where students are asked to show their comprehension of texts by producing drawings. Feedback from colleagues who used Carol's resources was very positive, making it clear that students gained in confidence to produce their own writing and brought the language to life.

There have been many benefits as a result of Carol's development work. As well as finding the work beneficial to her students, she also found it personally enriching to be part of a group of people committed to improving teaching and learning. She also learned to see her teaching through the eyes of the students and to create simple resources which allow them easier access to German. She now sees this way of working as an integral part of her teaching. She wants the work she has done to develop beyond the support sheets to wider strategies. Perhaps most importantly, Carol's understanding of and confidence in her own ability to lead and contribute to teaching and learning practice within and beyond her department has grown enormously.

References

- McCabe, A. & Horsley, K. (2008) *The Evaluator's Cookbook*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Pachler, N. & Field, K. (2001) *Learning to teach modern foreign languages in the secondary school*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.