

Professional paper

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Authentic Communication in Business German: Implementing Peer-Assisted Learning in a Multilingual Higher Education Context

Abstract: *This professional paper reports on the implementation of Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) within the Business German curriculum at the Haute École de Gestion Fribourg (HEG-FR), a bilingual university of applied sciences in Switzerland. While the program formally requires advanced language proficiency (C1) by graduation, many students begin their studies at a lower level of German. To address this gap, a PAL-based Inverted Classroom model was introduced in fall 2024/25 with the aim of fostering authentic, workplace-related communication in German.*

Students independently researched professional topics and conducted 60-minute sessions in German, thereby maximizing oral practice, reinforcing subject-specific vocabulary, and cultivating confidence in extended speaking situations. Peer and instructor evaluations, carried out entirely in German, supported reflective language use and collaborative learning.

Preliminary observations suggest that PAL stimulated learner motivation and enhanced both linguistic proficiency and transversal competences such as self-reflection and critical thinking. Rather than presenting a systematic empirical study, this paper provides a practice-oriented account of the implementation, highlighting its pedagogical implications for multilingual higher education settings.

Key words: *Peer-Assisted Learning, Classe renversée, Multilingualism, German for Specific Purposes, Business German*

1. Introduction

1.1. Language education in a multilingual environment

Switzerland is a multilingual country with four national languages, which creates both opportunities and challenges for education and the labor market. The Canton of Fribourg exemplifies this environment as one of the officially bilingual cantons, where French and German enjoy equal status. The School of Management Fribourg (HEG-FR) prepares students for professional contexts that require high levels of linguistic and intercultural competence. Within its bachelor's program in Business Administration, students may choose monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual study tracks, and are expected to demonstrate advanced proficiency in their second national language (French or German) by the end of their studies.

In this context, Specific Purpose Language (SPL) courses such as *Wirtschaftsdeutsch* (Business German) play a central role. These courses are designed to equip students with the linguistic and communicative skills required in business contexts, including negotiation, professional correspondence, and workplace interaction. Despite structured language support, many students face challenges in achieving the targeted proficiency, particularly in oral communication. These efforts reflect wider European recommendations on plurilingual and intercultural education, which stress the importance of integrating multiple languages and communicative competences into higher education curricula (Beacco et al., 2016).

1.2. Motivation and learner-centered approaches

To respond to these challenges, HEG-FR integrates innovative methodologies such as the *Classe renversée* and Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL). Task-based and learner-centered approaches have been shown to enhance motivation by placing students in active roles and encouraging authentic language use (Berthiaume & Daele, 2013; Huang, 2024). Motivation is closely linked to students' perceived competence and the value they attribute to a task (Rege Colet & Lanarès, 2013). By engaging students as co-teachers and encouraging them to design and lead learning activities, PAL creates meaningful opportunities to practice professional German in realistic contexts. The approach also resonates with findings from flipped classroom research, which emphasizes student-centered interaction and preparation outside the classroom as key drivers of engagement (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). As Huang (2024) emphasizes, task-based approaches are particularly effective for

fostering oral proficiency, since they require learners to apply language in authentic and professional situations.

1.3. Aim of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to share insights from the implementation of PAL in the Business German course with third semester students at HEG-FR. The focus lies on:

- illustrating how PAL fosters authentic communication and oral competence in German,
- examining its motivational impact in a multilingual classroom, and
- discussing implications for language teaching in applied higher education.

This contribution positions PAL as a professional and pedagogical innovation rather than as a research experiment. By reflecting on practice and student feedback, it seeks to inform colleagues interested in integrating collaborative learning approaches into specific-purpose language teaching.

2. Debating Club – Preparing for Peer-Assisted Learning

2.1. Purpose and context

A preparatory debating club in the spring semester served two purposes: it strengthened students' motivation for the Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) sessions in the fall and enhanced their awareness of the importance of constructive feedback. Establishing a trust-based learning environment was crucial, particularly in heterogeneous groups where weaker learners often hesitate to participate due to fear of mistakes. Within this supportive atmosphere, inhibitions about speaking German in front of peers were markedly reduced.

2.2. Observations from the debating club

During the debating club, students presented a chosen topic in pairs in a 30-minute interactive session, followed by an online evaluation questionnaire. These activities revealed both linguistic strengths and weaknesses. Compared to traditional oral exams, the sessions demanded greater spontaneity and interaction, often revealing that communicative competence did not always align with formal proficiency levels. Notably, several B1/B2 students demonstrated advanced communicative strategies exceeding their tested proficiency level.

While the online questionnaires achieved only a 60% response rate, the oral feedback exchanged during sessions proved highly valuable. This suggests that feedback mechanisms in peer learning settings should prioritize immediacy and interactivity. At the same time, the experience highlighted one of the well-known challenges of peer assessment: students often struggle to adopt the teacher's evaluative perspective, which can result in them hesitating to provide critical feedback to their peers. (Topping, 2005)

This confirms the findings of several studies that PAL must be introduced to courses and curricula in a well-thought-out and careful manner, and that students must also be taught how to provide constructive feedback.

2.3. Lessons for further implementation

Based on these experiences, several adjustments were implemented for the PAL sessions in fall 2024/25:

- More accessible feedback formats were introduced to improve participation.
- Greater emphasis was placed on linking language proficiency with interactional competence.
- Vocabulary development was prioritized to better prepare students for the C1 exam level.

3. Project Launch – Peer-Assisted Learning in the Inverted Classroom

3.1. Organization and topics

The PAL project was launched with a group of ten students, each responsible for delivering a 60-minute session. Topics were drawn from two main areas:

1. Linguistic and communicative aspects (e.g., politeness strategies in German, modal verbs and particles, extended relative clauses).
2. Themes related to digitalization and sustainability (e.g., corporate social responsibility, sustainable mobility, artificial intelligence).

These topics aligned with the oral exam requirements in the fourth semester and ensured early exposure to specialized vocabulary. Beyond the thematic focus, the organization of these sessions also reflected the principles of the *Classe renversée*, which advocates for role reversal and active learner responsibility in knowledge construction (Cailliez & Henin, 2019).

The one-hour sessions were particularly beneficial, as meta-analytic findings indicate that longer, well-structured PAL interventions tend to produce stronger performance gains (Bengesai, Amusa, & Dhunpath, 2023).

3.2. Teaching methods

Each PAL session incorporated at least two language skills and applied diverse methods such as plenary or group discussions, presentations, interactive quizzes, role-plays, and comprehension tasks. A consistent requirement was that all sessions must be conducted entirely in German.

3.3. Feedback and evaluation

Structured peer feedback was collected at the end of each session through short evaluation grids that included both ratings and mandatory comments. This approach emphasized the pedagogical value of constructive feedback and helped maintain a high level of engagement.

4. Insights from the Peer-Assisted Learning Sessions

4.1. Collaboration and heterogeneity as added value

The diversity of methodological approaches and the high level of student participation confirmed earlier findings that learners particularly value collaborative settings and peer exchange (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2023). Several students explicitly mentioned that the experience provided them with a new perspective on the work of language teachers.

A key factor in the effectiveness of the sessions was the heterogeneity of the group. It included bilingual students proficient in Swiss German dialects, students with exchange experience in German-speaking Switzerland, learners with bilingual school education, and those with limited prior exposure to German. This mix proved valuable, as students contributed their own examples and collaboratively explored complex topics, such as modal particles. Peer support was particularly beneficial for students with less immersive language experience. This observation is consistent with meta-analytic findings showing that peer learning formats in higher education can significantly improve course performance (Bengesai, Amusa, & Dhunpath, 2023).

4.2. Addressing linguistic complexity: Modal particles

One example of the benefits of heterogeneity was the treatment of German modal particles. For many French-speaking learners, these structures are particularly challenging, as subjectivity in French is expressed through the *subjunctif*, while in German modal particles fulfill this role.

Two strategies proved useful in teaching this topic:

- Cross-linguistic bridges: conditional clauses in French and German provided an accessible starting point, followed by references to English modal verbs.

- Systematic approaches: grammar resources such as *Grammatik mit Sinn und Verstand* (Rug & Tomaszewski, 2008) emphasize authentic spoken German and group modal particles according to register and communicative situation. The systematic study of individual modal verbs introduces learners to authentic language use through many exercises. Another helpful resource for French-speaking students, particularly for advanced learners in higher education, is the grammar book *Grammaire de l'allemand* (Schanen & Confais, 2017). It takes a pragmatic and clear approach to language phenomena in specific situations, especially from a contrastive perspective. Although students were encouraged to conduct their PAL sessions entirely in German, excerpts from the Schanen & Confais grammar book were made available to them in a multilingual perspective to facilitate understanding, given the complexity of the subject matter.

This multilingual support reflects the Council of Europe's principles of plurilingual education, which encourage learners to use all their linguistic resources to construct meaning and deepen understanding (Beacco et al., 2016).

While these strategies offered a structured entry point, the peer discussions within the heterogeneous group were crucial for applying theoretical knowledge in authentic contexts. Students effectively co-taught alongside the lecturer, reinforcing each other's learning. Although the complexity of modal particles cannot be fully addressed in a single session, this collaborative exploration fostered openness and a positive attitude toward advanced topics.

4.3. Technology, AI, and perception of competence

A critical perspective was raised by one student who questioned the strict prohibition of French during group work. While translanguaging may facilitate understanding, the project's objective was to strengthen oral competencies in German through immersion.

More broadly, some learners appeared to underestimate the importance of moving beyond B2-level competence. This may be related to their reliance on AI-based tools for translation and text generation, which reduce the perceived necessity of mastering advanced structures. Fan et al. (2024) describe this as 'metacognitive laziness.' At HEG-FR, students regularly use laptops and AI-supported tools, which shape learning processes by blurring the distinction between comprehension and active production. These dynamics underline the need to highlight the professional value of advanced proficiency for employability in Switzerland's multilingual job market.

5. Motivation and Student Feedback

5.1. Motivational dynamics

Student feedback consistently emphasized that PAL was a motivating format. The freedom to design sessions fostered a strong sense of ownership and competence, which aligns with Rege Colet and Lanarès's (2013) model linking motivation to perceived competence and task value.

Representative comments included:

- 'The freedom we had in preparing our session was very enjoyable. Leading a class for an hour was enriching and gave me confidence.'
- 'The courses were interactive and practical. We really worked on speaking skills in everyday business contexts, which was motivating.'
- 'The collaboration between a peer and our lecturer in clarifying linguistic points was excellent.'

These reflections highlight that PAL not only supported linguistic development but also contributed to students' confidence, self-efficacy, and engagement. Motivation plays a decisive role in language learning, particularly when learners perceive tasks as both valuable and achievable. This aligns with broader research on language learning motivation, which highlights the dynamic interplay between learner autonomy, perceived competence, and contextual support (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Similar benefits of reciprocal peer tutoring have been observed among young language learners, where scaffolding between peers supported both linguistic progress and confidence (Xu et al., 2022).

5.2. Workload and assessment considerations

One recurring criticism concerned the workload compared to traditional oral exams. While students acknowledged the benefits of PAL, they noted that the preparation required more time than a standard 10–15 minute oral assessment. Since the exam weighting (40% oral, 60% written) is fixed at the institutional level, greater transparency about assessment expectations is essential. For future iterations, assessment rubrics will be co-constructed with students to foster understanding and acceptance of the format.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

6.1. Pedagogical implications

The experience at HEG-FR illustrates that Peer-Assisted Learning fosters authentic communication, enhances motivation, and supports the acquisition of specific-purpose language competences. PAL not only functions as a pedagogical tool but also reflects collaborative work practices and feedback cultures prevalent in professional contexts.

To maximize its effectiveness, careful introduction and transparent communication with students are required. Constructive feedback, self-evaluation, and co-construction of assessment rubrics are essential to ensure acceptance and engagement.

6.2. Transferability

As Cailliez and Henin (2019) demonstrate, the *Classe renversée* has primarily been tested in non-language disciplines, such as engineering, management and health sciences. However, its principles of learner autonomy and collaborative knowledge construction are equally applicable to language learning and education.

The present project therefore extends the model to a context of teaching a specific-purpose language, demonstrating that its focus on shared responsibility and active participation can also foster linguistic and intercultural competence.

This approach can be transferred beyond language teaching. PAL can be adapted to other disciplines that emphasize communication, collaboration, and applied knowledge. It promotes critical thinking, self-awareness, and the ability to explain complex concepts in one's own words — an indicator of deep learning.

6.3. Future research and practice

While this paper reports on professional practice rather than empirical research, several avenues for further exploration emerge:

- Pre- and post-assessments (e.g., self-evaluation, e-portfolios, level tests) to document linguistic progress in PAL contexts.
- A 360° evaluation combining self-, peer-, and instructor perspectives to capture learning processes more comprehensively.
- Closer investigation of the role of AI tools in language learning, particularly their influence on motivation, autonomy, and the distinction between comprehension and production.

By integrating these perspectives, future projects can further clarify how PAL contributes to both linguistic and transversal competences in multilingual higher education.

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