

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

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Volume 33, Issue 3, pp. 59-69

DOI: 10.36366/frontiers.v33i3.548

[www.frontiersjournal.org](http://www.frontiersjournal.org)



# **Understanding Austria from Afar: Treating Regional Variation in the Virtual German as a Foreign Language Classroom. A Case Study in Light of COVID-19**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced nearly every aspect of the academic world, and study abroad is no exception. Particularly in the foreign language learning sector, the unprecedented switch from in-class lectures to distance learning brought with it many challenges. Not only were language instructors tasked with creating an interactive language learning atmosphere from afar but continuing to spark student motivation while catering to a broad range of learning goals constituted a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. The following case study therefore seeks to provide an easily adaptable and interactive task-based activity for the German as a foreign language classroom that should support learners in gaining a deeper understanding of the social dimensions and usages of Austrian regional varieties. Furthermore, the activity is designed so as to be applicable in both an online as well as face-to-face classroom and accommodate foreign language instructors with less experience in digital course delivery and/or minimal access to learning management systems.

## **Abstract in German**

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Accepted date: 6 April 2021

Die COVID-19 Pandemie hat nahezu jeden Aspekt der akademischen Welt beeinflusst, und *Study Abroad* ist keine Ausnahme. Gerade im Bereich des Fremdsprachenerwerbs hat die beispiellose Umstellung von Präsenzunterricht auf Fernlehre viele Herausforderungen mit sich gebracht. Nicht nur wurden Fremdsprachenlehrer:innen mit der Aufgabe konfrontiert, eine interaktive Sprachlernatmosphäre aus der Ferne zu schaffen, sondern auch die Motivation der Schüler:innen trotz der Situation zu wecken, aufrechtzuerhalten und gleichzeitig ein breites Spektrum an Lernzielen zu berücksichtigen. Dies hat eine scheinbar unüberwindbare Hürde dargestellt. In der folgenden Fallstudie handelt es sich daher um die Bereitstellung einer leicht adaptierbaren und interaktiven *task-based* Aktivität für den Deutsch als Fremdsprachenunterricht, die Lernende dabei unterstützen soll, ein tieferes Verständnis der sozialen Dimensionen und Verwendungen österreichischer Regionalvarietäten zu erlangen. Darüber hinaus ist die Aktivität so konzipiert, dass sie sowohl im Online- wie auch im Präsenzunterricht Einsatz finden und von Fremdsprachenlehrer:innen mit wenig(er) Erfahrung in der digitalen Abhaltung von Lehrveranstaltungen und/oder minimalem Zugang zu Lernmanagementsystemen umgesetzt werden kann.

### **Keywords:**

Study abroad, Austrian advertising, second language acquisition, COVID-19, Sociolinguistic variation

### **Introduction**

In the early stages of the widespread COVID-19 outbreak, Austrian colleges and universities experienced an otherwise unprecedented pivot from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning. While there exists a plethora of excellent technological tools, virtual learning environments and online activities that can be used to enhance or even replace conventional foreign language classroom instruction,<sup>1</sup> implementing such distance learning models within a matter of days, for a broad range of learning goals and, beyond that, with no or only minimal prior online-teaching experience is hardly feasible. The present case study thus seeks to illustrate an easily adaptable and interactive task-based activity for the German as a foreign language (GFL) classroom<sup>2</sup> that ultimately aims to support learners in developing a functional

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of employing technology in the foreign language teaching setting see *inter alia* Blake (2007, 2009, 2013) and Levy (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Given that the students were no longer learning German in the target-language environment due to returning home and migrating to an online format as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I refer to these learners as *foreign* language learners and not *second* language learners.

understanding of the social dimensions and usages of Austrian regional varieties. Moreover, the activity is conceptualized so as to be applicable in a number of contexts, such that it should accommodate foreign language faculty with a) less or no online teaching experience; b) overloaded teaching schedules that leave little preparation time; and c) minimal access to learning management systems (e.g. *Blackboard* or *Moodle*).

## **Redefining our Goals**

To briefly contextualize this case study, the independent educational institution in question integrates experiential learning outside the classroom into its curricula and combines this with an in-class theoretical framework. The underlying goal is to equip study abroad students with the scaffolding needed to function within the context of an increasingly globalized and interconnected society (The Forum, 2020). As the institution finds that students achieve this goal best by actively participating in and personally experiencing the foreign culture of their study abroad destination, the supplementary use of technology and learning management systems tends to play only a very marginalized role. To this extent, the massive, disruptive shift from face-to-face instruction to distance learning presented a multifaceted problem: firstly, the institution was ill-equipped to deal with the technological complexities of distance learning; secondly, I as a foreign language instructor at this institute struggled to meet the technological challenges due to inexperience in digital course delivery; and lastly, student motivation suffered greatly due to a program emphasizing experiential, intercultural learning within a foreign culture itself migrating to an online format.

In light of the aforementioned obstacles resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, I visited a virtual seminar designed to assist GFL teachers in transitioning to digital learning. While the seminar failed to provide many concrete pedagogical methods or activities for the digital classroom as I had hoped, the seminar coordinators did examine a central aspect of the GFL classroom that deserves to be addressed with renewed importance: our goals. Within the context of foreign language learning, determining and articulating the goals and the learning outcomes for learners constitutes an essential part of student success. If we ourselves are uncertain or unclear regarding the relevance of what we are teaching and what our students should accomplish, then how should they accomplish it? The coordinators challenged us to consider whether our goals remain unchanged in an online context as opposed to the face-to-face classroom. While reflecting upon this during the seminar, opinions

initially varied drastically. Ultimately, however, many of us seemed to reach the consensus that our goals must evolve to accommodate the new tactics, strategies and course delivery methods used to achieve them.

One pre-pandemic Performance Descriptor, which “[p]rovide descriptive performance outcomes adaptable to fit differences in languages and learners” (ACTFL, n.d., para. 8), articulated for my beginning intermediate German course syllabus stated “students can order a full meal at a restaurant in German – with adequate preparation time – and understand fundamental words/sentence structures used by the waiter.” While this Performance Descriptor in no way depicts an unrealistic or even unnecessary goal for GFL learners, I greatly questioned the descriptor’s situational relevance. Given that students had now left the target language (TL) country to return home, in-class and interpersonal interaction between learners was restricted to a computer screen. Moreover, students lost a critical component for linguistic advancement, namely experiential and intercultural learning against the backdrop of the TL culture. This provided a clear framework for demotivation, such that learners saw only limited applicability for the rehearsed situations and dialogs. Consequently, this detracted from students’ underlying motivation to learn the language, thus negatively impacting the learning atmosphere in the virtual classroom. So as to better handle these obstacles, I found an adaptation of my pre-pandemic goals and Performance Descriptors to be advantageous.

In lieu of focusing primarily on proficiency in the foreign language and encouraging students to experience the culture outside the classroom, as I have done with learners in the TL setting, I opted for classroom activities that should directly facilitate cultural and intercultural learning even in an online context. As opposed to learning and practicing vocabulary and phrases applicable in only selected linguistic settings, e.g. ‘ordering in a restaurant’, the course would effectively engage students to look at and analyze Austria through a cultural lens and make use of diverse authentic, regional-specific material. As such, students should additionally improve their existing receptive competencies and further train their language production skills through synchronous class discussions. The following chapters elaborate on one specific activity I employed in the GFL classroom. It targets in particular the treatment of regional<sup>3</sup> and sociolinguistic

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<sup>3</sup> For a closer look at the regional variation in Austria, see for example Ammon (1995), Ruck (2017), Soukup & Moosmüller (2011), Zehetner (1985) and for a broader view of German in the European context: Clyne (1995).

variation in the Bavarian-speaking regions of Austria,<sup>4</sup> as these forms of variation constitute a critical aspect in understanding the Austrian culture and furthermore an important step in developing intercultural competence.

## Case Focus

Generally, online coursework requires elaborate and detailed lesson plans, a structured educational platform that streamlines student learning and additional audio and video material. With a lack of preparation time, experience and/or appropriate learning management systems, foreign language instructors will likely face challenges in bringing intercultural and interactive teaching to the computer screen. The following case study therefore seeks to make use of easily accessible, regional-specific video advertisement material portraying various aspects of Austria's (socio)linguistic situation. In using such material, learners should begin to develop or expand upon their existing sociolinguistic competence<sup>5</sup> and so further not only their cultural understanding of Austria, but their intercultural competence as a whole.

## Bringing Austria into the Virtual Classroom

While the exact modeling of the linguistic variation in the Bavarian-Austrian dialect regions has long been a point of yet unresolved discussion among sociolinguists, the traditional tripartite model has often been employed to characterize the relationship between language varieties. This model assumes there to be a basis dialect at the end of one pole, a standard variety at the end of the other and a myriad of varieties (i.e. colloquial language) in-between (see Ebner, 2008; Löffler, 2005). The sociolinguistic situation of Bavarian-Austria is thus conceived to be a so-called continuum with these opposing end poles (dialect vs. standard). Native German speakers who grew up in Austria or highly competent foreign/second language speakers familiar with the Austrian linguistic landscape can skillfully differentiate between these language varieties and often even move freely between them depending on the situation and their communicative goal (see for instance Auer, 2005 as well as Spiekermann, 2007). Soukup (e.g. 2009, 2011, 2013) has repeatedly treated the

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<sup>4</sup> Austria is home to two main dialectal regions, namely Alemannic and Bavarian (Wiesinger, 2006; see Soukup, 2009, p. 31 for a detailed overview of regional dialects in Austria in English). As our institution is situated in a Bavarian-speaking area of Austria, the following activity focuses explicitly on Bavarian dialect(s).

<sup>5</sup> Sociolinguistic competence can be defined as the knowledge and skills of speakers regarding when and how to vary one's speech according to various, often situational, factors and the ability to perceive such features in their conversation partner's speech (Regan, 2010, 22).

topic of how Austrian speakers use their dialect competence to convey or perceive meaning not explicitly expressed verbally. Listeners of the same or similar linguistic background understand such subtleties (Soukup, 2011) and tend to use these themselves. For German as a foreign/second language learners, who are not or only very limitedly familiar with the Austrian linguistic landscape and the cultural identity behind it, sensitizing oneself to these cultural phenomena takes time, in part as well due to this topic's marginalized position in many GFL curricula (Pabisch, 2012; Ransmayr, 2007). The following activity therefore seeks to address the connection between culture and language by demonstrating their relationship in the context of Austrian advertisement.

The first step of this activity is asynchronous in nature. Students were asked to refer to YouTube™, enter “österreichische Werbung 2020” (Austrian advertisement 2020) and watch the first ten advertisement videos. Of these ten, students were then directed to choose three videos which, in their opinion, fit one of the following labels: “einfach zu verstehen” ‘easy to understand’, “mittel zu verstehen” ‘okay to understand’ and “schwer zu verstehen” ‘hard to understand’. While these beginning intermediate GFL learners by no means understood every utterance or phrase used in the advertisement material, they were fully capable of categorizing the advertisements based on the level of comprehension difficulty. During our next synchronous session, we discussed as a group which advertisements fit the labels from above. During this exercise, the students' answers varied only a little and largely mirrored my expectations. The following table displays student consensus regarding the comprehension difficulty of certain video advertisement material.

**TABLE 1. STUDENT CONSENSUS.** COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTY OF ADVERTISEMENT MATERIAL.

easy to understand	okay to understand	hard to understand
<p><b>Business:</b> Billa  <b>Advertisement Title:</b> <i>100% Frischfleisch aus Österreich – nur bei Billa</i></p>	<p><b>Business:</b> UniCredit Bank Austria AG  <b>Advertisement Title:</b> <i>TV Werbung 2020</i></p>	<p><b>Business:</b> Felber (Bäckerei)  <b>Advertisement Title:</b> <i>“Nageln Sie sich eine Topfengolatsche hinein!” Felber-Bäckereien in Baumärkten nach Corona</i></p>
		<p><b>Business:</b> Raiffeisen Bank  <b>Advertisement Title:</b> <i>Willkommen in Österreichs stärkster Gemeinschaft!</i></p>

Of the ten advertisement videos, the four listed above were selected by the students to best fit one of the three categories. After our list had been compiled, we discussed further in plenum why these four advertisement videos fit into these categories. As expected, students based their decisions on the level of ‘dialect’ (i.e., a regionally colored language variety deviating from the normal conception of standard German) spoken in the videos. The more intense the regionally colored language, the harder the material was to understand. As previously discussed, dialectal/regionally colored language varieties constitute an important characteristic of the Austrian identity and therefore largely represent a central cultural element. So as to guide students to an autonomous realization of this, I asked them to research each business listed in Table 1 separately and note five keywords or phrases that they feel describe the business. Students were encouraged to complete their research in German, however using the English translations when and where needed would not result in any type of point or grade deduction.

While results will vary from class to class and person to person, there are typical characteristics of each business that justify the different linguistic usage in the advertisement material. For instance, students categorized Raiffeisen Bank’s advertisement under “hard to understand” due to the main speaker’s strong(er) regional accent. After researching the bank, students noted keywords such as *regional*, *community of values*, *personal* and *individual*, as Raiffeisen Bank promotes their regional presence, strong ties to community and individualized and personal banking opportunities (Raiffeisen Bank, n.d.). Felber (Bäckerei) (a bakery located in Vienna), received similar keywords, such as *regional* and *traditional*.

Conversely, students saw the grocery shop Billa in a very different light and categorized its advertisements as “easy to understand”. Keywords noted included for instance *healthy*, *sustainability* and *Austrian* (in relation to the domestic production of food), but key terms from the far more dialectal advertisement material such as *regional*, *personal* or *traditional* did not seem to be applicable in this context. For UniCredit Bank Austria, categorized by the learners under “okay to understand”, students tended to use a mixture of keywords which show similarities to both Billa and Raiffeisen/Felber, such as *sustainable future*, *Austria-wide* and *community engagement*. Keywords such as *regional* and *traditional*, however, did not appear to adequately represent the advertisements, so students reported.

As a final step, students were asked to research “Austrian identity” and note – similar to the second task – five key aspects. For this assignment, students

were free to either research autonomously, as a group or even digitally contact any Austrians who they might have met while abroad. Several students also completed combinations of all three possibilities. Keywords often used were, for instance, *musical* (as Mozart is a well-known ‘Austrian’ and the movie *Sound of Music* was filmed in part in Austria), *traditional/tradition and culture* (with regard to regional and national festivals, cuisine etc.) and every student mentioned finding some relation to Austrian dialect(s) during their research. During a discussion in plenum, students then compared their research findings from the Austrian identity task with the words they associated with each business. In completing this task, students began to notice the words they found during the Austrian identity task had similar characteristics to the words they pinpointed for describing the businesses. In a further step, students then considered in how far their description words for the businesses might correlate with the language variety used in the particular advertisement material. In this case, I was particularly interested in whether students would notice the correlation between words such as *regionality* and *traditional* and the use of a regional dialectal variety in the video advertisements. During our virtual discussions and with very minimal aid from me, students were capable of drawing the conclusion that Austrian advertisement material focusing on ‘international’ topics such as *sustainability* or *sustainable future* tend to avoid dialectal usage whereas advertisements seeking to emphasize aspects related to *regionality*, *community (& values)* and *tradition(al)* make more use of regional and dialectal language characteristics.<sup>6</sup> When prompted to hypothesize the reasoning behind these findings in small groups, students suggested the targeted audience<sup>7</sup> as a primary factor behind an advertisement’s choice of language variety. Others postulated a business’s key traits and characteristics to be the reason behind the use of a particular variety. One student suggested a business’s products to determine the variety used in advertisements.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, Bavarian-Austrian speakers use regionally colored language for a variety of reasons (e.g. to express humor or appear more personable) and in diverse contexts (e.g. when speaking with family/acquaintances or in emotional instances) (Soukup, 2009). The use of regional varieties is not explicitly bound to expressing tradition or regionality.

<sup>7</sup> On an important note, several students were parallelly enrolled in an intercultural communication and/or marketing course. Thus, these students might have had supplementary knowledge regarding methods used to target an audience against different cultural backdrops. Should faculty in another German course use this activity, students may need additional aid in drawing the conclusions outlined above.

<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis is rather difficult to justify. In Table 1, we see that two banks are listed and they were categorized in two different sections by the students. Advertisements from *Billa*



While I am of the opinion that there is no one correct answer as to why advertisements favor one language variety over another, I did feel that this activity as a whole offered students the opportunity to expand their intercultural awareness and further develop their linguistic capabilities. Despite the fact that I did not test students on the material from this activity, I observed students during our virtual sessions making use of different varieties, albeit often humorously. For instance, during the first several minutes of class, I regularly asked students to explain to me in German what they did since we last saw one another. One student explained how she made – or in her words, “attempted to make” – traditional Austrian *Kaspressknödel* for her family. In response to my question as to how they tasted, she responded with a dialectally colored phrase: “sie waren *goa ned guad* (gar nicht gut)” ‘they were not any good’, which was met with amused laughter from her colleagues. By using this dialectally colored phrase, the student showed that she, even if this was a subconscious decision, associated something traditionally Austrian with an Austrian dialectal phrase and used the phrase to elicit laughter from her colleagues. I found this to be an important step in developing fundamental skills in differentiating and using different language varieties to fulfill specific communicative goals (i.e. sociolinguistic competence), the goal in this case being referencing something traditionally Austrian and using dialect humorously. The student’s colleagues also demonstrated an important developmental step in their language learning journey, namely recognizing and understanding the student’s communicative intent. This example leads me to believe that employing authentic Austrian advertisement material in the GFL classroom and using it to illustrate the relationship between language and culture can support students in gaining a deeper understanding of the Austrian culture, the sociolinguistic situation in Austria and in further developing intercultural and sociolinguistic competence in general.

## Conclusion

The ability to deal with COVID-19 has and will become a competence that we as a foreign language teaching community must acquire and continuously train and develop. This includes rethinking the GFL classroom. While our underlying goal to create competent GFL speakers might not change drastically, our tactics and strategies used to achieve this goal will likely see a radical shift. We must adopt our classroom strategies and teaching activities to fit the

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also differ greatly from advertisements from, for example, *Hofer*, another grocery shop in Austria.

situation without compromising the learning output of our students. However, the work and effort we invest in creating these new activities and learning to teach amidst a pandemic should not go lost once we return to the traditional classroom. Instead of conceptualizing teaching techniques and classroom activities applicable to only either the online or face-to-face classroom, the foreign language teaching community should consider investing time and focus into redesigning our current repertoire of teaching tactics, strategies and activities to accommodate any educational format, be it online, traditional or otherwise. This case study thus shares one example of how foreign language teachers/professors/trainers can use online advertisement material to treat regional variation in Bavarian-speaking Austria and support students in developing foreign language proficiency, intercultural awareness and sociolinguistic competence. Although this activity cannot replace the intimate and personal intercultural encounters that students experience within the TL country, it offers language teachers a possible substitute for the digital classroom and on which students/teachers can expand when once again in the target language culture.

While this case study explicitly focuses on German as a foreign language learners the activity is easily adaptable for countless other languages in diverse cultural contexts. In the coming weeks, months and possibly years, we as a foreign language teaching community will be challenged to redefine, redetermine and redevelop our curriculum. Success in these unprecedented times will mean flexibility and tolerance, both as an instructor and student, and requires us to continuously adapt our teaching so as to both actively and effectively engage students in intercultural and interactive second language learning.

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