

# Teaching German Post War History in a Virtual Foreign Language Classroom- A Focus on Teaching German as a Foreign Lanugage

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**Abstract**—History has become a main component of the foreign language education, as it paints the society and the culture of the target language in detail. Since decades different strategies have been used to awaken the interest among the students in the face-to-face foreign language history classroom. But due to the increasing tendency towards online learning new strategies to teach foreign language history were required. The following study focuses on a new set of strategies to teach post war history to learners of German as a foreign language in a virtual foreign language classroom. It discusses the efficiency of these strategies to improve the performance of the students. Data were collected from 23 undergraduates of German as a foreign language at the University of Kelaniya, who follow the Four-Year Honors Degree Program for their Bachelor of Arts Degree. Quantitative data were collected by evaluating class test and presentation marks of the students, whereas qualitative data were collected through classroom observations. The results show that, using student centered learning, asynchronous learning, audio visual media, interactive activities in the breakout rooms, quizzes to revise the work, online games, role plays, debates, spaced repetition method to memorize the words easily and online collaborative tasks helped students to memorize the historical events as well as improve the foreign language skills. Therefore, it is concluded that these methods are most suitable to teach history for any foreign language learner in a virtual foreign language classroom to enhance their performance, motivation as well as interest towards history.

**Keywords**— Online-Teaching; Foreign Language Teaching; German as a Foreign Language, Post War History of Germany

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The goal for most of the foreign language learners is to improve the communication skills of the target language. Many of them are not aware, that grammar structures and vocabulary are not enough to master a foreign language. In the reality, mastering of a language means mastery of linguistic knowledge as well as the knowledge of culture and society of the target language. To understand the present situation, the knowledge of history plays a significant role. Especially when it comes to Germany, the second world war led to catastrophic consequences in the whole country. People suffered under the reconstruction due to the terrific war, governance of four victorious powers France, Great Britain, Soviet Union and United States followed by Berlin blockade and cold war. Some of these historical events still have influence on the behavior of some people in the society.

“Memories of wars remain even more firmly anchored in the minds of all people and also require a special approach. While the generation directly affected by the war is still strongly affected, the following generations suppress these terrible events. The warnings that these incidents have towards people are ignored and nobody thinks about the consequences of the war anymore. But in order to spare people such cruel experiences, critical reflection is required in all areas in order to learn from the mistakes of the older generations” (Schneider, 2003)

Teaching history for students is not merely transmitting information of the historical events. Rather it is conveying detailed pictures of the historical events and the feelings of the people raised as a result of these incidents. Thus, it is not easy to fulfil this task through strategies, which are normally being used in a foreign language classroom. In the digital era, paying attention to the online learning, it is understood as a real challenge for foreign language teachers.

Considerable number of strategies were used to teach post war history for learners of German as a foreign language at the University of Kelaniya virtually. Some approaches caused disinterest among the students towards learning, they were bored in the classroom and a decrease of attendance was recognized. And it affected their performance negatively. Thus, the aim of the research is to identify the effective strategies to be used to teach post war history to learners of German as a foreign language virtually and to identify their effectiveness on student’s classroom performance. Therefore, the research was based on following two questions.

1. What are the effective strategies to teach post war history to learners of German language in a virtual foreign language classroom?

2. *What impact do the strategies have on the performance of the foreign language learners?*

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Teaching and learning history in a non-native language is a challenge for the language teacher as well as the learner. History develops knowledge, helps understand people, structures and changes in the past. It shows, how past influences present, evaluate and analyses sources. Further it has the ability to link historical periods with each other. Some considerations have been mentioned to plan history lessons. These include activating prior knowledge, selecting suitable way of input and output, including collaborative tasks and supporting in cognitive challenge, where the students need help to think in the non-native language. Further thinking skills should be developed in the classroom. [1]*

*Lewis (2010) in his research "Learning about history in the foreign language classroom" addresses the issue, history not being discussed in the context of foreign language education in contrast to the culture. He introduces an introductory English as a foreign language course, which includes innovative concepts and discussions about history in the foreign language classroom. He finds that history learning is an adult need and the discussions on history has a positive impact on learners. [2]*

*Lyons (2009) introduces samples lesson plans, online assessment methods and online learning tools for virtual history learners. He provides online resources and gives recommendations on, how to make the online history classroom interactive and learner friendly. [3]*

*Borries (1992) in his research introduces various general didactic principles for the preparation, implementation and follow-up of history lessons, which help teachers to acquire characteristics like adaptable perception, methodological flexibility and self-criticism. [4]*

*Considering about the history lessons, they are easily conducted in online classes than in traditional face-to-face sessions, as its content requires close reading, analysis of evidence, debates, critical and analytical discussions. These are easily achievable in the digital platform than in the traditional classroom. [5]*

*In spite of much research done in the field of online history teaching and learning. The focus paid towards teaching history in a virtual foreign language classroom is very little.*

## 3. METHODOLOGY

*To teach post war history of Germany to learners of German as a foreign language, the stages in the history after the world war 2 were divided into categories. These include post war reconstruction, allied occupation, currency reform, Berlin blockade, cold war, Berlin wall and reunification. Strategies were introduced to teach the stages of history effectively in the virtual classroom. Data were collected by 23 undergraduates of German as a foreign language at the University of Kelaniya, who are in the 3rd year of the Four-Year Honors Degree Program at University of Kelaniya. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, whereas quantitative data were collected by evaluating and comparing the class test and presentation marks of the students before and after using the strategies. The grades related to marks are used to show the results: 85-100 A+, 70-84 A, 65-69 A-, 60-64 B+, 55-59 B, 50-54 B-, 45-49 C+, 40-44 C*

### **Strategies introduced to teach post war history**

*Using audio-visual media- German films or German dubbed films related to war and post war were shown in the classroom. After watching the film, the students should analyze the aspects of the film and give their feedback regarding the film in the target language. The films used include "Phoenix" 2014, "Lore" 2012, "Violette 2013". They partly discussed inside the breakout rooms and presented in the main session or individually presented their opinions. Here the students were able to feel the hardships and sufferings of the people due to the catastrophic incidents. Apart from the films, video clips of native speakers were used to introduce new topics in the classroom. Before giving the content, students were allowed to suggest the topic after watching the video clips. The students should explain with their own words, what is explained or seen in the video. The students got chance to give feedback on the comments of the other students. Sometimes guided questions were given for the video clips. In case of difficult language or topics used in the video, the students were allowed in breakout rooms to discuss, what they saw or hear in the video. The students should exclusively talk in German language inside the breakout rooms*

*Asynchronous learning- By using the student management system, lecturer used to upload different videos, articles depending on the topic. The text/ texts, which were to be taught in the classroom were sent to the students on the previous day along with questions. Students should prepare themselves for the questions and watch videos related to the topic, which are already being uploaded in the student management system. In the lecture they have to answer the questions. After this, the lecturer explains exactly the historical incident and give more information. Padlet was used to upload different videos. The students even shared different videos, articles, images and links of films.*

*Online collaborative writing activities- Using Etherpad and Google docs, the students wrote essays on different topics by exchanging their ideas. They summarized the texts explained in the classroom together in the breakout rooms. The lecturer monitored the breakout rooms time to time and gave feedback on the progress*

*Spaced- Repetition Method- The Spaced repetition method was used by the lecturer to memorize the vocabulary for the students. Here new words in the texts were repeated by the lecturer by keeping an interval of 15 minutes, one hour or one week. Instead of repeating the words at the same time, such intervals were kept in-between repeating the words. Synonyms were too given for new words.*

*Breakout rooms- Texts were given to the students to explain their meanings in the target language with their own words. Apart from this, the text was divided into 2-3 parts. Students in each breakout room had to build questions for one part of the text. These were then exchanged among groups and were being answered.*

*Increase of the speaking activities- Students were engaged in more activities to use the target language inside the group during the discussions. The lecturer randomly asked questions and take feed backs from the students in the main session.*

*Other interactive activities- Topics were given to conduct tv programs, role plays, and debates. To make the sessions more attractive and enjoyable, suitable virtual backgrounds were being used during tv programs, debates and role plays. Kahoot games and quizzes were used to revise the work and memorize new vocabulary.*

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### **Classroom Observations**

*Classroom observations show that, showing films during the classroom helped students to improve the language skills through listening. It was very effective that, they internalized the grammatical structures as well as vocabulary without any effort. Some students explained that they were able to use some words they hear, without learning them by heart. They used words automatically in their conversations. The students were empathized in the historical incidents related to the war period. They felt the sufferings and hardships undergone by the people at that time. This made them awaken the interest and motivation. They got used to find more films and new information regarding the topics. Group discussions about the films and video clips improved their speaking skills, as they were engaged in speaking activities in the target language. They were not shy anymore to speak in front of the classroom, as they got used to talk in German often. They expanded the horizons.*

*Asynchronous learning led the students to do self-directed learning. As mentioned above, the articles, videos, texts and questions regarding the topic were uploaded beforehand. This made them to get used to self-directed learning, as they searched more and more information by their own, without depending on the teacher. Therefore, student centered learning improved during the sessions. The students explored more information and they gained more historical knowledge and language knowledge. They participated actively in the sessions. The increase of reading helped them to use the grammatical structures and vocabulary they saw in the articles. This made their writing more accurate and they used complex grammatical structures than before. As written activities were given online, each student could edit the content. They found it interesting to exchange ideas. They summarized texts together using online tools. It improved their summarizing skills. For the lecturer it was easy to correct, because the document is already shared on the screen. With the Spaced Repetition Method, where the lecturer repeats new words by keeping an interval, the students were able to memorize the words more easily. They used synonyms very often. The other interactive activities like role plays, debates, tv programs improved their interest towards the history lesson and improved their critical and analytical skills.*

##### **Results of Presentation and Assignments**

*When analyzing the results, a total improvement of results was seen after using the strategies. The results of first semester represent results of the students before using the strategies and second semester represents the results after using these strategies.*

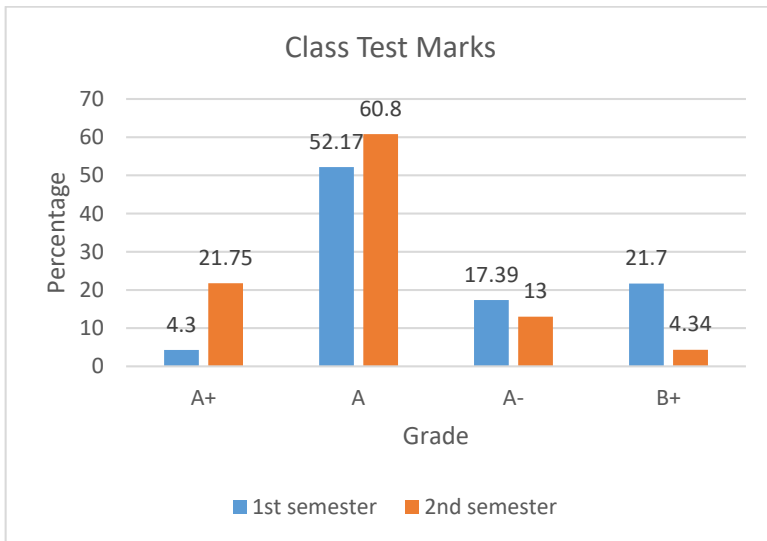


Figure 1: Class Test Marks

Fig: 1 shows the class test marks of the students before and after using the new strategies. The highest grade of A+ has increased from 4,3% to 21,75%, which is an increasement of 405%. The grade A has increased form 52,17% to 60,8%, which is an increase of 16,5%. The lowest grades A- and B+ has decreased from 17,39 to 13% and from 21,7% to 4,34%, which is a decrease of 25,24% and 80% respectively. Therefore, it is clear that the highest grades have been increased and lowest grades have been decreased after using the new strategies

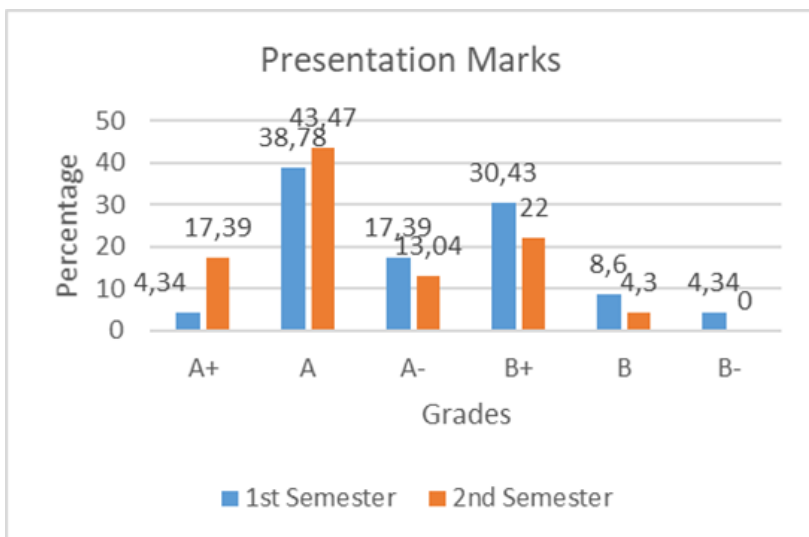


Figure 2: Presentation marks

Fig. 2 shows the presentation marks of the students before and after using the new strategies. The highest grade of A+ has increased from 4,3% to 17,39%, which is an increasement of 304%. The grade A has increased form 34,78% to 43,47%, which is an increase of 25%. The lower grades B+ and B have been decreased from 30,43% to 22% and from 8,6% to 4,3%. The percentage of decrease is 27,7% and 50% respectively. The lowest grade B- has disappeared after using the strategies. Therefore, the highest grades have been increased and lowest grades have been decreased or disappeared after using the new strategies

### 5. CONCLUSION

The strategies introduced by the lecturer to teach post war history to leaners of German as a foreign language include usage of audio visual media to increase historical as well as language skills, usage of asynchronous learning to promote self-directed learning, increasing speaking activities in the classroom, usage of online collaborative activities, usage of Spaced Repititon Method to improve vocabulary and interactive breakout room activities to encourage and awaken the interest of the students. Thus, it is concluded that the

*student-centered learning along with asynchronous learning and visual media are effective in improving the students' knowledge in a virtual foreign language history classroom. Further these methods are recommended in teaching history to learners of any foreign language to increase their interest, motivation as well as their performance in the virtual foreign language classroom.*

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