

The MuViT Authoring Tool: Fostering Communicative Competences of Young Language Learners

Viviane Lohe, Laura Armbrust & Daniela Elsner | Frankfurt

Der Artikel beschreibt die Ziele und den Hintergrund des von der EU geförderten Projekts MuViT, im Rahmen dessen eine mehrsprachige Software für Grundschulkindern entwickelt wurde. Dabei liegt der Fokus auf dem im Rahmen des Projekts entwickelten Authoring Tool, mit welchem Schülerinnen und Schüler eigene digitale Bilderbücher in verschiedenen Sprachen erstellen und gestalten können. Es werden methodische Möglichkeiten zum Umgang mit dem Authoring Tool im Fremdsprachenunterricht aufgezeigt, konkrete Lernaufgaben vorgeschlagen, und erläutert, welche Kompetenzen dabei erreicht werden können.



Mehr Beiträge zu diesem Thema:

www.babylonia.ch >

Thematisches Archiv > Themen 3 und 5

What is MuViT?

MuViT (Multilingual Virtual Talking Books) is an EU-funded project that has taken into account the most prominent qualities of our post-modern society: diversity of languages and cultures on the one hand, and the advent of New Media on the other. Our pupils are growing up in this modern world and therefore new concepts of teaching and learning are required “in order to prepare [them] to actively engage in a socially diverse, globalized, and technological world” (Elsner, 2011: 30). Against this background, the MuViT consortium, with partners from Germany, Russia, Turkey, Spain, and Latvia, has developed a multilingual software application that includes 6 storybooks for children at primary level in five different languages (English, German, Latin and Cyrillic Russian, Turkish and Spanish). The stories are read out aloud by native speakers, and pupils see images and text as well as a synchronous word highlighting function. Besides, the stories are complemented by tasks for reading comprehension, language awareness and cross-linguistic comparisons. Moreover, an Authoring Tool has been developed, allowing pupils to write their own stories and share them with children from all over the world within the Web Community (for further information see www.mu-vit.eu). Thus, pupils’ plurilingual and media

competences will be promoted when working with the tool.

The focus of this paper is on the usage of the Authoring Tool. It will give an overview of the technical application, its possibilities for teaching, and the competences that can be developed with the tool. It, moreover, provides hands-on methodological suggestions for the practical application of the tool in the language classroom.

The MuViT Authoring Tool

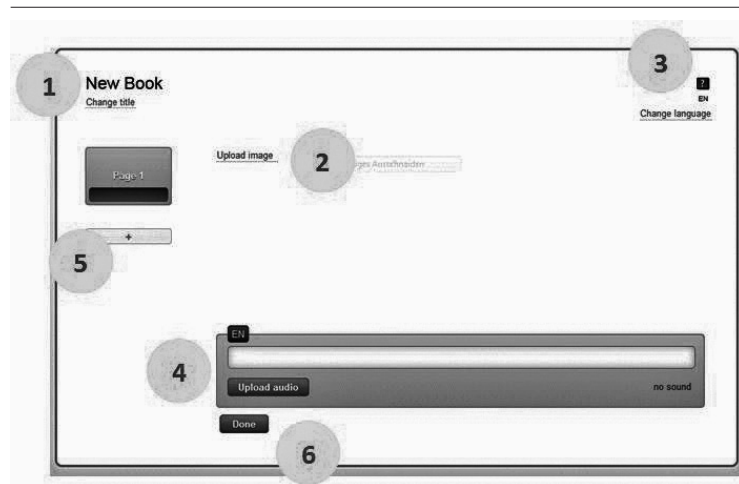
The Authoring Tool has been designed to actively engage young learners at primary and early secondary level, as well as their teachers, in using the language(s) of their choice to create and write their own stories, and hence to produce authentic language material. By uploading the story onto the MuViT website, it becomes public for logged-in users all over the world and can get translated by others who are interested in the story. This opens new doors with regard to the inclusion of heritage languages, dialects or any modern foreign language. Furthermore, the Web Community also offers the opportunity to trigger communication since the “process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior” (Webster, 1983: 266) is respected, and discourses about the stories that have been created with the Authoring Tool are sparked. In our context, discourse includes pragmatic competences of the participants of communicative actions, i.e. knowledge about intentions of messages, and goes beyond the simple exchange of information (see Nuttall, 1996: 12). Within the Web Community, users are invited to translate and discuss the stories, to comment and give feedback on the stories or/and organize communicative exchange. With this, users need to take into account and respect cultural differences and

linguistic uniqueness, and adhere to appropriate forms of politeness when it comes to feedback and/or content inquiries. It becomes evident that users therewith do not only exchange information, but are requested to go one step further and apply intercultural communicative competences.

How to use the Authoring Tool

To work with the Authoring Tool, the user firstly needs access to the internet. The Authoring Tool is available at <http://www.mu-vit.eu/community/call-muvit-authoring-tool.php>. Users need to register first: they have to create a password which will then be sent to their email-address. The Authoring Tool looks as follows:

Fig. 1. MuViT Authoring Tool Login



First of all, the title of the book has to be chosen (see Fig. I, number 1). This can easily be done by clicking on the button “change title”. Secondly, users can upload images (see Fig. I, number 2) by clicking on “upload image”. Images should have .jpg or .png format. Images can be selected from the local computer as long as they do not infringe copyrights. A text in a chosen language (Fig. I, number 3) can be typed into the field provided (number 4). Audio files from the computer can be uploaded as indicated (see Fig. I, number 4), ideally stored in .wav format. New pages can be added to the story with the “+” button (see number 5). Once the story is finished, the process is completed by clicking on the “done” button (see number 6). The story will then be listed in the story section of the MuViT Web Community (<http://www.mu-vit.eu/community>) and thus becomes public for logged-in users all over the world. It is offered for translation by other users, giving them the possibility to include their heritage languages.¹ Examples of stories that have been developed by primary students can be found within the MuViT Web Community under “Story”. The first story, *The Big Bang*, has been written by two German girls living in Turkey. In the first step, they wrote the story in German and drew pictures accordingly. In a second step, they translated the story into Turkish and English themselves, supported by a teacher. The story was then translated into Spanish by a Spanish native speaker who had joined the MuViT Web Community. Looking at the story, it becomes

obvious that it is manageable for young children to find both linguistic differences as well as similarities. For example, all languages use onomatopoeic words to describe the bang that occurs in the story. In this context, pupils can find other onomatopoeic words and use them when they write their own stories to illustrate actions. This can also spark discussions about the literary genre. Onomatopoeic words are usually used in comics whereas the content and stylistic devices of *The Big Bang* are actually based on fairy tales. With regard to form, children can find several words in the stories that are similar in all of the four languages (*lemonade*, *toast* and *chocolate*):

English: *Everybody was drinking yummy lemonade and eating toast and chocolate.*

German: *Alle tranken leckere Limonade und aßen Toast mit Schokolade.*

Turkish: *Herkes çok nefis limonata içip ve cikolataı tost yemis.*

Spanish: *Todo el mundo bebió una limonada muy rica y comió tostadas con chocolate.*

Here, pupils can be asked to find the translations as fast as possible or research about the origin of the words. Pupils will also get sensitized towards the differences between the languages, e.g. on a syntactical level: Even if the words *lemonade*, *toast* and *chocolate* can easily be found in all of the languages, due to their lexical similarity, pupils will realize that they cannot translate the sentences word by word, as in Turkish for example the object is followed by a verb.

Additionally, intercultural awareness can be raised. Pupils can find out about the different tastes of children all over the world – Are there cultures/countries that dislike chocolate? What would happen if pupils from a country where people do not eat or have chocolate read the story? What sweets do they choose if they translate the story or write a similar story? Would they choose other pictures?

Meanwhile 10 different books can be found within the Web Community, waiting for their translation into more languages.

Why use MuViT - Aims and Opportunities

In line with requirements of modern foreign language teaching concepts (see for example Bach & Timm, 2013), the Authoring Tool has been developed to shift the focus from teacher-centred and input-oriented teaching to student-centred

and output-oriented teaching. The teacher can be seen as an organizer, interlocutor and assistant of the learning process. So the pupils are put in the centre of learning: teachers acknowledge their prior knowledge, create room to share pupils' own expertise and foster self-confidence in their individual learning process. Hence, students are able to produce highly authentic material from their own environments, i.e. also texts about culture specific aspects in order "... to explore, learn about, and critically engage with a broad variety of texts and differing literate practices" (Elsner, 2011: 30). Pupils may write about festivals in their countries or life in school. The users are able to add their own pictures to the text, as well as sound and produce multimodal texts. Additionally, the exchange of culturally specific texts may lead to intercultural awareness: in this context, pupils do not only recognize differences but also a wide range of similarities between cultures. Therefore, we assume that prejudices and stereotypes can be reduced as pupils are asked to relativize themselves and value others (see Byram, 1997: 34) and notice that many of our daily practices are similar all over the world. The most important characteristic of the Authoring Tool from the pupils' perspective is its opportunity to bring the outside world of our pupils into the classroom. Pupils can integrate individual ideas, thoughts and realities into their narrations. In contrast to traditional textbooks used in school, these materials (text, pictures and sound) are products of pupils' own environments and therefore an authentic teaching and learning resource, and hence highly motivating. Exchanging the stories on the MuViT Web Community ensures in return that pupils all over the world can profit from a realistic point of view on cultural and linguistic phenomena written by pupils themselves.

To meet the needs of modern (foreign) language teaching, the following competences as teachers' everyday tools are explained with regard to the Authoring Tool, exemplarily referring to the German educational standards as they mirror the goals of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see Council of Europe, 2001) on a more feasible level. The German educational standards comprise three competence areas: Functional Communicative Competence, Intercultural Competence and Language Learning Competence (see Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004).

Moreover, the German *Kultusministerkonferenz* as well as the CEFR stress that contemporary foreign language teaching needs to be future-oriented and aims at the following goals:

- extending language education to an education towards multilingualism,
- reinforcing Europe's cultural diversity,
- supporting mobility and integration,
- preparing for an international economy and work environment. (see Council of Europe, 2001; Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004).

The Authoring Tool takes these objectives and competences into account, fostering both the above-mentioned competences and the new goals of language education.

Communicative Competence

Communicative Competence is the most crucial competence for language learning (e.g. Piepho, 1974). It integrates the sub-skills listening comprehension, listening and visual literacy, speaking, mediating, reading and writing. The Authoring Tool helps to develop and enhance all of the mentioned skills, focusing on A1 of the level of competences known from the CEFR (see Council of Europe, 2001: 21ff). In the following, a clear distinction with regard to the Authoring Tool will be made:

1. *Listening comprehension* can be defined as an "active process of constructing meaning by applying knowledge to the incoming sound" (Buck, 2001: 31). It is necessary for young learners to understand basic phrases and expressions of everyday language, which can be guaranteed by listening to the Authoring Tool as the narrators of the stories, who are native speakers, are telling the stories in a non-sophisticated way, namely using everyday language and expressions.

This means that pupils do not only have the possibility to listen to stories in their mother tongue or in the target language, but also in their heritage languages or languages they may have never heard or actively worked with before. By means of this, they can compare their L1/L2/Lx to other languages and enhance their (cross)-linguistic phonemic and phonological awareness.

2. *Visual Literacy* is understood as the ability to perceive pictures and visual statements consciously, to critically reflect on them, use them appropriately and meaningfully; or actively create them (see Hümpel-Lutz, 2006: 92f). Within the context of young language learners using the Authoring Tool, this skill plays a crucial role because the pictures used in the stories help language learners to decipher the meaning of the text. Moreover, the images themselves deliver additional information to the written text, and thus need to be closely analyzed. Furthermore, pupils can actively and creatively design their own pictures when developing their stories. This asks for a critical reflection of the message their stories are supposed to convey. In other words, learners need to ask themselves – how will I transfer language into images? Which information needs to be illustrated and how should this be done?

3. The CEFR defines the overall oral production – *speaking* – as an activity when “the language user produces an oral text which is received by an audience of one or more listeners” (Council of Europe, 2001: 58). Pupils, even at a very young age, are able to produce simple phrases about living conditions or daily routines, for example. The Authoring Tool takes advantage of this and offers the possibility to enhance the written stories with sound. The audio-narration can then be uploaded to the platform as well and accompanies the written text. In addition to that, working with the Authoring Tool can trigger speaking activities and discourse with and about texts. The pupils can talk about their own stories in their classrooms, and discuss content, form and images of their stories with their peers while producing them. Moreover, communicative interaction can be activated when pupils read, view and listen to the stories of children from other countries. The teacher has to provide meaningful tasks that help to set off a discussion about the content and/or the form. In addition to that, the MuViT Web Community serves as a platform to exchange opinions about the storybooks. Therefore, pupils have the chance to communicate with children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
4. *Mediating* means that the users of a language “act as an intermediary between locutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally [...] speakers of different languages” (Council of Europe, 2001: 87). Pupils can summarize stories from the Authoring Tool and the Web Community that are written in a foreign language using their mother tongue or the target language. Hence, also children with mother tongues other than the language of the environment are able to present their knowledge by translating and mediating.
5. *Reading* is known as a combination of processing letters, to words, to phrases, to sentences, as well as using prior knowledge about a certain topic in order to construct meaning (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2013: 87f). With regard to the Authoring Tool, pupils are actively engaged to construct meaning from the different stories on a basic level, understanding simple sentences. The pupils

read stories by other pupils and in other languages, too. Thus, reading skills in the mother tongue(s) will eventually be supported and at the same time children can also read in foreign languages and compare them to their first or second language.

6. *Writing* means that the “language user [...] produces a written text which is received by a readership” (Council of Europe, 2001: 61). Writing plays a minor role in primary education (see Kultusministerkonferenz, 2005: 2). However, writing skills can be fostered on a very basic level, writing down single words or short sentences. As pupils can write their own stories via the Authoring Tool, writing skills can be encouraged, too. Writing skills can be developed on a breakthrough level (A1), meaning that students can write simple isolated phrases and sentences (see Council of Europe, 2001: 26). With the Authoring Tool, the pupils could, for example, fill in gaps with known vocabulary as a preparatory task and then upload the whole text. Again, this does not only apply to the target language but also to the children’s heritage languages. If pupils are able to write in their mother tongue, they can be encouraged to do so.
7. *Lexis, Grammar, Pronunciation and Intonation, Orthography*
German educational standards summarize these skills using the umbrella term “commanding language means” (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004: 9). It is said that pupils who have successfully participated in foreign languages classes are able to produce and comprehend correct utterances and texts in the foreign language. This applies to teaching in secondary education rather than primary education. The focus in primary foreign language classrooms is on strengthening interest and motivation to learn new languages as well as to sensitize pupils for linguistic differences and similarities



By creating and writing their own stories and uploading them with the Authoring Tool, pupils are able to work with the language in a playful way and they can experiment with linguistic diversity.

(see Kultusministerkonferenz, 2005: 3). Therefore, raising language awareness on an affective and a cognitive level is the major goal rather than commanding a language to a native-like extent. Language awareness can be defined as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Association for Language Awareness, 1992). In contrast to grammatical knowledge, Language Awareness contains reflection about language use and general knowledge about language structures (see Elsner & Wedewer, 2008: 24). The Authoring Tool offers the possibility for young language learners to gain experiences with the concept of Language Awareness by writing, reading, and listening to stories uploaded on the MuViT Web Community.

Intercultural Competence

According to the German educational standards, Intercultural Competence includes three skills that are to be reached: socio-cultural knowledge, understanding in dealing with cultural differences and practical accomplishment in intercultural encounters (see Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004). Intercultural Competence includes knowledge about cultural diversity in one’s own as well as in other cultures. In this context, it is important not to focus on the differences between cultures only but rather on the similarities that the globalized world entails, overcoming the notion of cultures that are defined by nationality and language (see Kramsch, 2001; Welsch, 2009). Moreover, Intercultural Competence should be fostered taking into consideration different cultures that are not necessarily part of one’s own culture nor of the target language.

As far as the Authoring Tool is concerned, pupils are able to read cultural characteristics from the stories, noticing similarities and sharing ideas about

cultural experiences in the respective classroom or within the MuViT Web Community. Furthermore, the Authoring Tool offers possibilities to change perspectives and consider the latter from all angles, hence to arouse curiosity for diverse cultural backgrounds, accepting and tolerating them and even noticing that there are more similarities than differences, i.e. pupils identify clothing of pupils from another country as similar to their own or notice resemblances in food and drinks or school routines. Besides this, the Authoring Tool provides opportunities to communicate with pupils from other countries, be it via the stories or via the Web Community platform.

Methodological Competence/ Language Learning Competence

When teaching a foreign language, the challenge is to create a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere that triggers experimental learning and creative thinking. Besides, language teachers need to initiate learning scenarios which help learners to reflect about and become aware of their own learning processes, e.g. by documenting steps to successful language learning, and describing important techniques to learn a foreign language. Aside from that, learning to work in cooperative environments has to be trained (see Kultusministerkonferenz 2004: 10). Moreover, methodological competences also include (critical) media competence.

By creating and writing their own stories and uploading them with the Authoring Tool, pupils are able to work with the language in a playful way and they can experiment with linguistic diversity. Stories that are already online can be used as a tool to observe

specific language aspects (e.g. different alphabets, diverse letters in different languages) or as a reflective tool that can be used to detect certain patterns of one or more languages, i.e. how a question is formulated. At the same time, the Authoring Tool offers possibilities to create cooperative learning environments. Pupils can write stories in pairs or groups and they can evaluate each other’s stories. Hence, their social skills will be developed eventually as they learn how to present feedback appropriately. Last but not least the Authoring Tool provides the chance to enhance media competence as the pupils have to work at the computer most of the time, even using the internet. When a class communicates with another class in the Web Community, teachers have to make the students aware of possible dangers of the internet, i.e. that the pupils never know who really communicates with them.

In summary, some task suggestions focusing on the above mentioned Authoring Tool and taking into consideration the competences described in the table 1 below.

Conclusion

The article has illustrated the multifaceted possibilities that working with the MuViT authoring tool offers for the multilingual and multicultural classroom.

Letting pupils read, write, create and discuss stories in many languages can be a first step to “a language-friendly environment” which, according to the Commission of the European Communities (2008), can be understood as “an environment where different languages are heard and seen, where speakers of all languages feel welcome and language learning is encouraged.”

Notes

¹ To view a story that has been uploaded to the Web Community, visit <http://www.mu-vit.eu/community> and go to “Story”. For downloading and playing stories, users need to download the MuViT Player from the MuViT website (www.mu-vit.eu). The player can be found under “Teacher Materials” when entering the password teacherMuViT. Alternatively, the MuViT Software, including 6 stories, the MuViT Player and a handbook with activities, can be purchased at the Oldenbourg Publishing House (www.oldenbourg.de/osv/; ISBN 978-3-637-01625-5).

References

- Association for Language Awareness** (1992). *Definition of Language Awareness*. Online: www.lexically.net/ala/la_defined.htm [10.11.2013].
- Bach, G. & Timm, J.-P.** (2013). *Englischunterricht: Grundlagen und Methoden einer handlungsorientierten Unterrichtspraxis*. 5. überarb. Aufl. Tübingen: Francke.
- Buck, G.** (2001). *Assessing listening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (The Cambridge language assessment series).
- Byram, M.** (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Commission of the European Communities** (2008). *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment*. Brussels.
- Council of Europe** (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elsner, D.** (2011). Developing Multiliteracies, Plurilingual Awareness & Critical Thinking in the Primary Language Classroom with Multilingual Virtual Talkingbooks. In: *Encuentro Journal*. 20, 2011-12, 27-38.
- Elsner, D. & Wedewer, V.** (2008). *Begegnung mit Fremdsprachen im Rahmen frühpädagogischer Erziehung*. Hochschuldidaktische Handreichung: Universität Bremen. Online: <http://www.elementargermanistik.uni-bremen.de/>

Table 1. Task suggestions focusing on the Authoring Tool and competences

Name of Task	Task	Main Competences
Creating and writing a story	The teacher asks the pupils to create a story in the target language (about their school, about their family, about their birthday, about their holiday, etc.), designed as a group work activity. Pupils are to write the storyline first before drawing pictures. After having finished their work, and teacher or peer correction has been completed, pupils copy the story into the Authoring Tool. The teacher photographs or scans in the pictures that can afterwards be then uploaded. Additionally, the teacher lets the pupils record their own stories. Here it is advisable that all pupils practice reading out aloud the stories and the class decides in the end which language versions should be uploaded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicative Competence: writing, visual literacy, speaking ○ Intercultural Competence ○ Language Learning Competence ○ Media Competence
Translating/ Mediating stories	Pupils translate or mediate their own stories or those from other pupils into different heritage languages spoken in the classroom. Pupils may also add sound files for new language versions and add pictures if necessary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicative Competence: mediation, speaking ○ Intercultural Competence
Analyzing and evaluating stories	The teacher chooses a story, already uploaded on the Authoring Tool, and discusses the content of the story in line with the images with the class. The class then gives feedback on the Web Community, maybe even asking questions on vague aspects of the story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicative Competence: reading, listening ○ Intercultural Competence ○ Language Learning Competence
Evaluating stories	The pupils check the stories that have already been uploaded to the website and are requested to write down or retell their favourite story, explaining the reasons for it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicative Competence: reading, listening ○ Intercultural Competence ○ Media Competence
Listening to stories/ Illustrating the story	The teacher can play only the narration of the story and pupils are asked to draw pictures accordingly or vice versa.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicative Competence: listening comprehension

Handreichung_Wedewer_Elsner_Fremdsprachen.pdf. [16.11.2013].

Hümpel-Lutz, C. (2006). *Elementarästhetisches Lernen in der Grundschule. Entwicklung und Evaluation eines medienintegrierenden Unterrichtskonzepts*. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt.

Kramsch, C. (2001). Intercultural communication. In: Carter, Ronald & Nunan, David (2001). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 201-206.

Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) (2004). *Bildungsstandards für die erste Fremdsprache (Englisch/Französisch) für den Mittleren Schulabschluss*. Beschluss vom 15.10.2004. München: Luchterhand.

Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) (2005). *Bericht „Fremdsprachen in der Grundschule - Sachstand und Konzeptionen 2004“*. Beschluss der Kultusministerkonferenz vom 10.02.2005. Online: http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2005/2005_02_10-Fremdsp-Grundschule.pdf [24.10.2013].

Müller-Hartmann, A. & Schocker-von Ditfurth, M. (2013). *Introduction to English Language Teaching*. 11. Aufl. Stuttgart: Klett.

Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.

Piepho, H.-E. (1974). Kommunikative Kompetenz durch Englischunterricht. In: *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht*, 8 (4), 7-24.

Webster's deluxe unabridged dictionary (2nd ed.). (1983). New York: Dorset & Baber.

Welsch, W. (2009). Was ist eigentlich Transkulturalität? In: L. Darowska & C. Machold, *Hochschule als transkultureller Raum? Beiträge zu Kultur, Bildung und Differenz*. Bielefeld: transcript.

www.mu-vit.eu [16.11.2013]

Viviane Lohe

works as a research assistant at Goethe University Frankfurt / Main in the department of Foreign Language Teaching. Her research interests are multilingualism and TEFL, language awareness, early foreign language

learning as well as educational standards and competence-oriented teaching.

Laura Armbrust

works as a teacher for English and P.E. at a primary and general secondary school in Wimberg, Calw. Before she started her career as a teacher, she worked as a research assistant at Goethe University Frankfurt / Main in the department of Foreign Language Teaching until December 2012.

Daniela Elsner

is professor for TEFL Methodology and Research at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Department of Foreign Language Teaching. Her research interests are pluri- and bilingualism and foreign language learning, early foreign language learning, CLIL and Immersion at primary level, Multiliteracies and Graphic Novels in the EFL classroom and teacher education.



Learning languages and discovering the world with a blackboard and a globe.