

Asgari, M., & Zanin, R. (2021). Teacher training using peer observation and video-based fieldwork: Observing linguistic input quality in German as a foreign language lessons at elementary school. In C. Nägele, B.E. Stalder, & M. Weich (Eds.), *Pathways in Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning. Proceedings of the 4th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, MuttENZ and Bern online, 8. – 9. April* (pp. 62–66). European Research Network on Vocational Education and Training, VETNET, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and Bern University of Teacher Education. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4596468>

## Teacher Training Using Peer Observation and Video-Based Fieldwork: Observing Linguistic Input Quality in German as a Foreign Language Lessons at Elementary School

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### Abstract

A sound reflection and analysis of linguistic input quality in German as a foreign language classroom can be made easier through lesson study, peer observation and an observation scheme. Based on the Teacher Input Observation Scheme TIOS (Kersten 2018), we, therefore, developed an observation form for linguistic input quality at South Tyrolean elementary schools, the LIOS II (Language Input Observation Scheme)<sup>1</sup>. The categories of the observation scheme, called LIOS II, also serve as a checklist for lesson planning and as a basis for peer observation and support lifelong learning. To ensure greater objectivity and validity during peer observation, we designed a detailed framework with verbal descriptors. During the pilot phase, a team of primary school teachers and a team of researchers evaluated the transcript of a lesson in German as a foreign language. Based on the numerical evaluations on a five-point rating scale and the discussions with the focus group, we revised the LIOS II. Especially in the categories "students are active, and tasks are problem-solving" and "explanations and comparisons", there emerged different evaluations and a lively discussion. We then revised these categories in the verbal descriptors accordingly. During the next phase of the project – a lesson study in an elementary school – the LIOS II will serve as a checklist for lesson planning and as an observation scheme for peer observation. So, the LIOS II can provide a helpful instrument for lifelong learning in the field of linguistic input quality.

### Keywords

linguistic input quality, peer observation, observation scheme, German as a foreign language

### 1 The reflection of linguistic input quality

How can a sound reflection of linguistic input quality take place in German classes at multilingual schools when a global pandemic requires "social distancing"? With the help of collegial observation on the basis of video recordings (Knapp et al., 2008) and online workshops, a differentiated linguistic awareness is to be developed. This is implemented by the two projects:

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<sup>1</sup> LIOS I based on the IQOS (Weitz 2010, 2015) was developed for kindergartens, LIOS II for elementary schools. See also Mastellotto, Zanin (forthcoming)



"Scientific monitoring in Italian-speaking kindergarten. Observation of linguistic input during activities in L2 German and L3 English" and "Process of designing, monitoring and testing of CLIL modules in German and English language". Both projects take place at the University of Bolzano and at Italian-speaking kindergartens and elementary schools in cooperation with the Italian-speaking school board of South Tyrol. Our research team adapted the Input Quality Observation Scheme by Martina Weitz (IQOS, Weitz 2015) and the Teacher Input Observation Scheme by Kristin Kersten (TIOS, Kersten, 2018) for the observation of German as a second language in South Tyrol.

Based on procedures and methods of collegial observation (Buhren, 2012), the TIOS was adapted for collegial observation and the original 38 observation categories were summarized or shortened to 20 categories. Our Language Input Observation Scheme for Elementary Schools (LIOS II) now includes the following categories: cognitively stimulating tasks (focus on authentic language use and meaningful content; students are active and tasks are problem-solving; authentic material; meaningful lesson structure; internal differentiation), language input quality (L2 quantity; adapted speech; syntactic variety and complexity; lexical variety and idiomatic language; formulaic language for routines; repetition of keywords; adaptation of L2 input to different competencies; verbal response to interaction of children), promotion of comprehension (contextualization; explanation and comparison; securing children understand), response to output (promotion of output and genuine interaction, code-switching is allowed; implicitly corrective feedback; appreciative atmosphere), and responses of children (children are listening).

Following the Common European Framework of Reference, a newly designed framework assigns verbal descriptions. This de-emotionalizes collegial observation. At the same time, teachers can independently improve their language input with the help of the "can-do" descriptions of the framework. The aim is to develop language awareness among teachers in multilingual South Tyrol in order to ensure high-quality linguistic input in elementary school. Based on recent studies (Festman, 2020; Kersten, 2018; Kersten et al., 2010, 2013, 2018; Weitz, 2015) it can be stated that a high linguistic input quality also leads to a high linguistic competence of the children. Our project assumes that language intervention strategies in early education are fundamental to promoting children's language proficiency, drawing on the concept of teacher talk, inspired by the analysis of microstructures (Collins, 1992) and the codification of teachers' interactive strategies in the classroom (Thornbury, 1996). It is linked to language development expertise in recent German studies (Fried 2007; Hopp et al. 2010) and to the tradition of language intervention for students with special needs (Raffler-Engel et al., 1975). Because the right to education means that all children, regardless of their native language and proficiency level, must be granted the right to learn the national languages adequately.

## 2 Pilot phase

The scientific monitoring project at the Italian-speaking elementary school, San Giacomo, Laives started in April 2019. The first 8 months were dedicated to (1) constituting a core group of L2 teachers, (2) planning in-service training activities on linguistic input and observation sheet TIOS and on language-sensitive teaching in all subjects, (3) language proficiency survey, (4) inventory of available materials for bilingual teaching.

In the second semester of the school year 2019/20, the testing of CLIL modules and the observation of language input (on-site observation with video recordings) with subsequent evaluation and analysis of the data should be started. Due to the pandemic, classroom observation had to be postponed. On the other hand, the training activities (2), language level survey (3), inventory of available material (4) were carried out.

In the pilot phase of our project, four teachers from a multilingual elementary school and two lecturers from the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano first used an observation sheet to

evaluate the transcript of a teaching sequence in German as a foreign language. This workshop, conducted online, began with a brief observer training session in which the teachers were familiarized with the LIOS II observation sheet. The categories of linguistic input quality were explained with the help of the corresponding frame of verbal descriptors. The teachers' own experience was included. Afterwards, the teachers as well as the researchers evaluated the transcript of a lesson in German as a foreign language simultaneously and on their own. Then the teachers discussed their scores on the LIOS II observation sheet so that ambiguities in the verbal descriptors could become clear.

Because the LIOS II will later be used for collegial observation in South Tyrolean elementary schools and for lesson study, a precise formulation of the categories is of crucial importance. During the next phase of our project, LIOS II will also form the basis for a checklist that teachers can use to better plan their own German lessons with a focus on linguistic input quality. For this purpose, it is important to first find out which descriptions of linguistic input quality in the LIOS II are unclear to the teachers. For this purpose, a quantitative survey was conducted to find out in which categories there are the greatest discrepancies between the evaluations of the transcript. The opinion of the researcher team is not considered as a guideline, on the contrary we would like to achieve a joint elaboration of the criteria that are crucial for linguistic input quality in German lessons. The differences in the evaluation of the transcript are therefore seen as a sign of ambiguities in the observation sheet LIOS II and are used as a clue to concretize the categories and the verbal descriptions. Therefore, the teachers' discussion was recorded and used as a qualitative survey for the revision of the LIOS II.

Interesting differences emerged in the evaluation by the research team and the educator team. The largest discrepancy in teacher and researcher ratings was found in the two categories: "students are active and tasks are problem-solving" and "explanations and comparisons", each with a 1.25-point difference on a five-point rating scale. With regard to these categories, there was also an insightful discussion among the teachers.

The educator team raised the question whether students can be described as active if they are supposed to answer only given questions without the possibility of using their own initiative and are hardly given time to express themselves. Since in the observed lesson the teacher simply asked for translations of German words into Italian, the research team awarded only one point in the category "students are active, and tasks are problem-solving". In the reference frame, this corresponds to the verbal descriptor: "Through traditional question-answer sessions with one learner at a time, almost all students are passive. Tasks are not problem-solving. Instruction is oriented to output rather than process." Teachers, on the other hand, gave an average of 2.25 points in this category, which corresponds to the following description: "Learners mostly answer the questions posed by the teacher. Further explanations are given only occasionally. Tasks are rarely put into context with the learner's world. Learners only sometimes have the opportunity to contribute themselves." The different evaluations and the discussions about the observed German lesson are showing that the category "students are active, and tasks are problem-solving" has not yet been outlined clearly enough. The descriptions were therefore subsequently expanded: As a further distinguishing feature we added the aspect of time, and the question whether the students are given enough time to be linguistically active.

The verbal descriptors of LIOS II were revised based on the teachers' discussions and on the relevant literature (Ahrenholz & Oomen-Welke, 2010; Jeuk, 2018; Nauwerck, 2009) in order to concretize observation and assessment in peer observation. Both teachers and researchers frequently drew on the framework of verbal descriptors in their assessment and were guided by the detailed descriptions of the categories. With a standard deviation of 0.24 points for the researchers and 0.35 points for the teachers on a scale of 1 to 5 points, the observation sheet and the framework of verbal descriptors showed good internal consistency. Also, the scoring in the comparison between teacher team and researcher team diverged only by 0.46 points with a

modal value of 1 point for the researchers and 2 points for the teachers. So, the reference frame with the verbal descriptors was already a helpful tool in the analysis of linguistic input quality. This shows that observation is not subjective and collegial observation does not have to be emotionally charged. By assigning verbal descriptors, objectivity, reliability and validity are better ensured in the evaluation of linguistic input in collegial observation as well as in lesson studies.

Generally, the linguistic input quality in the analyzed teaching sequence of a German as a Foreign Language lesson at a South Tyrolean school was overall rated as very low by the teaching team and the research team. The arithmetic mean of the points awarded in the observation sheet was only 1.46 out of 5 possible points. This illustrates that there is a great need for further training in the area of linguistic input quality at the elementary schools in South Tyrol.

### 3 Observation sheet and framework for the improvement of linguistic input quality

During the following project phase, four teachers from the Italian speaking San Giacomo elementary school are working together with the research team to develop a German as a foreign language lesson as part of a lesson study. With the help of the children's book *Zilly* (Korky, 1989), the reading skills of the students are developed, literary learning is reinforced and language skills are taught. Already during the preparation of the material in the context of the lesson study, the focus lays on linguistic input quality. For this purpose, we created a grid for linguistic concretization (Tajmel, 2017) that is based on the profile levels of Griesshaber (2006, 2008), and that is suitable for the children's book *Zilly*. After the joint development of the teaching concept, a teaching sequence will be recorded. The cameras installed due to Covid-19 will help to reduce reactivity. The video recordings will be then analyzed in more detail with regard to linguistic input quality in the lesson study team. We aim to find out in which specific areas of linguistic input quality further training is needed. Subsequently, workshops can be developed for the low-rated categories of the LIOS II. The information will also be used for the transnational Erasmus+ project "Learning Scenarios", in which universities and schools in Sweden, Poland, Belgium and South Tyrol are currently creating learning scenarios.

Content-related and linguistically stimulating input forms a crucial basis for the adequate support of all children in multilingual schools. Since this is not an easy goal to achieve, we would like to use the LIOS II observation form and the framework of verbal descriptors to provide teachers with helpful tools for their own teaching, for peer observation and for lesson studies. At the same time, we would like to generate data to find out in which areas of linguistic input quality there is a need for further training. With the help of a questionnaire for German teachers at Italian-speaking elementary schools in South Tyrol, the experience, assessment and self-perception of the teachers in the context of linguistic input quality and lesson studies will also be surveyed. Through these means we hope to establish a good path for lifelong learning.

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