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German as a foreign language

Cultural Content and References in the Teaching of German

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This article examines the rationale for teaching culture in the secondary school German curriculum in England and looks at cultural references evident in the teaching of German at a boys' school in Greater Manchester and a co-educational school in Ashford, Kent. It examines the status of German as a subject in British secondary schools today and then discusses a study into pupil awareness of German culture. It argues that there is a wide range of elements of German society which teachers can take advantage of to encourage more pupils to continue learning German and to supplement the cultural knowledge provided by language assistants and school trips alike. Furthermore, it will argue that the inclusion of cultural references in the day-to-day teaching of German can play an important role in supporting the role of German in secondary schools.

Introduction

German teachers and enthusiasts have suffered from a difficult period in the new millennium. From being one of the two main foreign languages taught in Britain's secondary schools (alongside French), the presence of German has seen a significant decline in universities and schools (Paton 2010; Payne 2012). Despite the pre-eminence of Germany on the European stage and the status of German as the most widely-spoken language in the European Union (Jeffery 2011), the number of pupils studying German at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education taken at age 16) has dropped over the past ten years. In Higher Education, the data are somewhat obscured as there are various types of language degree (e.g. single honours, dual honours) and a language can be taken often in combination with other subjects. That said, many departments for the study of German in UK universities have closed and the number of university students studying German has fallen by 75% since 1998, though again, it is not clear if this figure only refers to single-honours students (Hensher 2009). The latest figures for the uptake of GCSE and A-Level (Advanced Level) German show that 5,166 pupils took A-Level German in 2011, down from 5,548 in 2010 and the number of GCSE examinees dropped from 70,169 in 2010 to 60,887 in 2011 (Joint Council for Qualifications 2011). The county of Pembrokeshire in Wales has dropped German completely (D. Evans 2011). Although all the three main curriculum languages, German, French and Spanish, suffered a drop in GCSE candidates in 2011, the decline of German has been such that

Spanish has now overtaken it as the second major language in British schools behind French (Payne 2012).

These figures show that German teachers urgently have to think of ways of how they can persuade more pupils to study their language. We suggest that more engagement with German culture can make German seem more attractive to pupils and in this article we will argue that there is a need to teach German culture to pupils in the UK, that teachers must actively fulfil the role of cultural interlocutors, and that the most important time to do this is in the early years of secondary school. Using data from a study conducted in both a boys' school in Greater Manchester and a co-educational school in Ashford, we will show that there are a number of cultural references which young people can easily be made aware of and which could help arrest the decline of pupils taking German in the higher key stages of the secondary school curriculum, and beyond.

Why German culture must be taught

German culture needs to be actively promoted by teachers, as pupils may not be exposed to it as much as the cultures of other major European languages. German as a subject has an image of being 'untrendy' (D. Evans 2011) and German culture does not have the presence and accessibility in Britain as do the Hispanic or French cultures. The spread of French, Spanish and English was aided by transcontinental political structures and dominion, whereas the failure of Germany to secure significant overseas colonies limited the spread of German beyond Europe, the expanse of German being limited to Namibia and parts of Latin America (Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil). Contrast this to the accessibility of Hispanic culture more broadly, such as in the United States, where some one in six of the population is of Hispanic origin (Conill 2012). This growing immigrant population has posed and will pose demographic and cultural questions for the United States, such as the question of a Spanish language national anthem (Avila 2006), but Hispanic artists in music and film now have unrivalled global reach due to the U.S. mass media industry (Lieven 2002). Without wishing to overstate the case, we argue that this serves to bolster the popularity of Hispanic culture in the U.K. such as through the music of Hispanic artists on MTV, combined with the popularity of football teams such as FC Barcelona, as well as Spain's continued popularity as a tourist destination; 'in 2011, Spain was the most common tourism destination in the EU for non-residents'

(European Commission Eurostat 2012). Of course, German culture has also held influence in America, being the most common ancestry of US citizens (Ecke 2011), yet it cannot be said to have anywhere near the same presence today that is then projected globally. German culture, then, must be encouraged in the U.K. classroom as children come into contact with other European cultures more readily.

For teachers in Europe at least, German may be the hardest language of the three major continental European languages to promote because of the difficulties of Germany's image. The statement by Chambers (Chambers 1999: 154) that British people 'appear to have a problem with the Germans' still remains true in part. References to the Second World War and football victories by England over Germany show this, as does the enduring image in the minds of the British of 'alleged attempts to monopolize sunbeds in Spanish holiday locations' (Chambers 1999: 154). The 'Don't mention the war' mantra in *Fawlty Towers* has come to encapsulate the attitude that some British people fall into when encountering the idea of Germany and it is ironic that John Cleese meant the sketch to parody Britain's xenophobia towards Germany in the midst of its own post-imperial decline (Sharma 2006). More recently, the crisis of the European single currency has provoked unfavourable comparisons of Angela Merkel's rule with the past in Greece and in the UK, where conservative pundit Simon Heffer has referred to this period as 'the rise of the Fourth Reich' whilst Simon Jenkins has stated that it is a good thing that 'Germany has no panzer divisions' (R. Evans 2011). It is important, then, that German teachers fight to emphasize positive elements of German culture in this historical context.

What can be taught?

There are many aspects of German culture which enjoy a positive presence in the United Kingdom which can be promoted in the classroom, even if they may not be immediately obvious to teachers. The success of German companies, particularly in the automobile industry (e.g. VW, Audi), is one (Evans 2012). Also, the growing popularity of German-style Christmas markets has seen more British towns and cities hold them – with the BBC reporting that Birmingham's German Christmas market is the third-largest in the world (BBC News 2011) – and tour companies have identified this trend with trips offered to German cities in the festive season. German cheeses (smoked Bavarian cheese), meats (Black Forest Ham, *Bratwurst*, *Frikadellen*) and other products (*Haribo* sweets, *Kinder* chocolate) are readily available in supermarkets, and British

families now shop at the UK branches of the German food stores *Lidl* and *Aldi*. German sporting success in football (e.g. *Nationalmannschaft*, *F.C. Bayern*) and Formula One (Michael Schumacher, Sebastian Vettel) has been a common theme of the past 20 years.

Benefits of learning about culture

Teaching culture in lessons often offers the first glimpse of the target language countries to the pupils, which can later be developed by school trips and learning with a foreign language assistant. Pachler and Field (2001) and Jones (2000) argue that culture can be taught successfully in the classroom and that the inclusion of cultural elements in teaching can make lessons more rewarding and enjoyable for pupils. Without a sense of the culture of the real world of the societies in which the foreign language is spoken, there can be motivational problems in foreign language lessons (Chambers 1999). With exchanges and foreign language assistants typically coming into the life of a pupil after Key Stage Three (KS3, 11-14 age group), teachers must often take the lead in teaching culture as textbooks, although not without useful pieces of cultural information (McNeill & Williams 2004), prioritize, by necessity, communication and grammar. Allen (cited in: Lafayette 2003: 57) states: 'Grammar is more likely to be the primary role of textbooks, culture by contrast, is diffuse, difficult to grasp, translate, [...] order and is ever-evolving'. So if culture is to have a positive effect on pupil participation and interest, then it is the teacher who must assume the responsibility of promoting the culture in the classroom to pupils in KS3. The teacher helps to provide a safe environment within which to study the foreign culture (Pachler & Field 2001) and the teacher can help best serve the development of cultural awareness by relating experiences and evidence (Jones 2000).

Learning about culture has benefits beyond understanding a particular foreign culture more deeply. Social and cultural awareness helps to develop our social relationships and also to deepen our understanding of aspects of native culture and develop a critical cultural awareness which allows us, in turn, to appreciate the similarities and differences between our own and other cultures (Jones 2000). Byram (2003; 1997: 38) outlined the *savoirs* of intercultural competence. Each of these *savoirs* refers to its own aspect of intercultural knowledge and learning. *Savoir-être* refers to curiosity and openness to learn about foreign and native cultures, which is an important milestone in the teaching and learning of German in the United Kingdom. *Savoir apprendre* indicates cultural

learning through social interaction. Byram (Byram 2003) expanded this to include *savoir comprendre*, which is the ability to interpret events and compare them to events in one's own culture and *savoir s'engager* is the ability to evaluate aspects of culture critically. While language assistants and exchange trips provide a means of developing these *savoirs* most fully, in the lower years of school teaching it is *savoir-être* which most often has to be encouraged first. By learning about foreign societies and customs we increase the possibility of overcoming social barriers in a world which is seemingly disposed to emphasizing differences (Lawes 2000b).

Culture in the teaching of German

As Lawes indicates, the definition of culture is much broader now than the narrow view of high culture which has prevailed in the past (Lawes 2000a: 89), such as literature, classical music or opera. Teachers in England should be familiar with the National Curriculum levels related to language (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2007), but what are the cultural elements which pupils will come into contact with through the Key Stages of the curriculum? In KS3, the emphasis is on basic elements of culture, which can be easily compared with British equivalents, such as food and drink, the structure of the school day, public transport and the single currency. The most fundamental elements taught at the start of KS3 include an overview of the countries where German is an official language and formal and informal greetings. In Key Stage Four (KS4, 14-16 age group), cultural references include pop bands, famous Germans, holiday destinations, festivals, education systems and city profiles. At this stage in the curriculum the language assistant (where schools still have them) plays the role of an active representative of the target language culture, and it is at this point where the bulk of children in Britain's schools come into serious contact with a Language Assistant for the first time. At Advanced-Level (A-Level, pre-university examination at age 18) there is a pan-European feel to many of the issues included in the syllabus (immigration, racism, drugs, crime and politics) (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance 2009). Lawes (2000a: 88) acknowledges that pupils may see this as more relevant yet questions if the coverage of these topics improves their understanding of them or helps tackle negative attitudes more effectively. The framework for the AQA A-Level provides an opportunity to discuss a region, writer, artist or period of history of the target language country. But for pupils to get to this stage they must already have an enthusiasm for the

basic elements of the country's culture and it is in the earlier stages where this will be cultivated.

Cultural references in the schools

German cultural references should be visible inside lessons and outside classrooms. Considering the schools at the heart of our project, in the school in Greater Manchester, displays in the corridors show pictures and descriptions of East German rock musicians and music, adverts for a popular lunchtime German club, as well as displays dedicated to school trips to the Rhineland, internships taken by sixth formers (17-18 years of age) with German companies and a selection of German football players. In addition, there are displays of the work of Werner Herzog, with commentaries of his films and pictures of the movie posters. A collection of his films is also stocked in the Department, along with other works of German cinema. In the classroom there is a display of the building of the Berlin Wall. As a Friday afternoon activity, pupils in Year 8 are permitted to watch *Das Boot* or *Bundesliga* football highlights depending on the teacher. To supplement the teaching of the period of German division, the Year 13 class was shown the film *Das Leben der Anderen*, a film showing the power and presence of the *Stasi* in East Germany.

In the school in Ashford, there is a display of the building of the Berlin Wall and the history of German division, the annual trips to Durmersheim and the Rhineland, a display on Austria and pictures of the German squad from the 2010 FIFA World Cup. There is also a German film club which runs once a week and pupils have seen *Das Wunder von Bern* and *Goodbye, Lenin!* amongst other films.

The study

The study is a small-scale study of pupils' awareness of German culture, designed to highlight what it is that pupils may or may not already know about aspects of German culture. This will enable us to draw some conclusions as to how best to support the teaching of culture in the German classroom as a way of motivating pupils to opt for, and to continue to study, German. As a small-scale study across two schools we do acknowledge issues around generalizability of the study to the wider population (Wellington 2006). But we would argue, firstly, that whilst the findings might not be scientifically generalizable, they will be 'relatable' (Bell 2000), that is, they will be of

interest to teachers of German in similar settings; the findings should resonate with those involved in teaching German and German culture and those looking to motivate learners of German in the UK and learners of German as a foreign language more widely. Secondly, we would argue that 'fuzzy generalizations' (Bassey 1999) could be drawn from our study. As Bassey states: 'A fuzzy generalization caries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and that it *may* also happen elsewhere' (Bassey 1999: 52, our emphasis).

The participating classes were given a questionnaire to complete in a lesson during the first summer half term. The questionnaire was designed with the pupils' level of German and knowledge of Germany in mind. It comprised six open questions which asked pupils to name:

- A German food
- A German brand
- A German way of celebrating Christmas
- A German festival
- A German-speaking personality
- Anything else Germany is noted for

The survey was conducted in accordance with the relevant ethical considerations and with the consent of the relevant staff (BERA 2011). The participating pupils in the school in Greater Manchester (School A in the results) had been learning German for eight months. The participating pupils in the school in Ashford (School B in the results) were from two different age groups but they had been learning German for 18 months at the time of the questionnaire. Across the two groups there were some pupils who had taken part in the schools' respective trips to Germany.

Figure 1. Responses to the request to name a German food
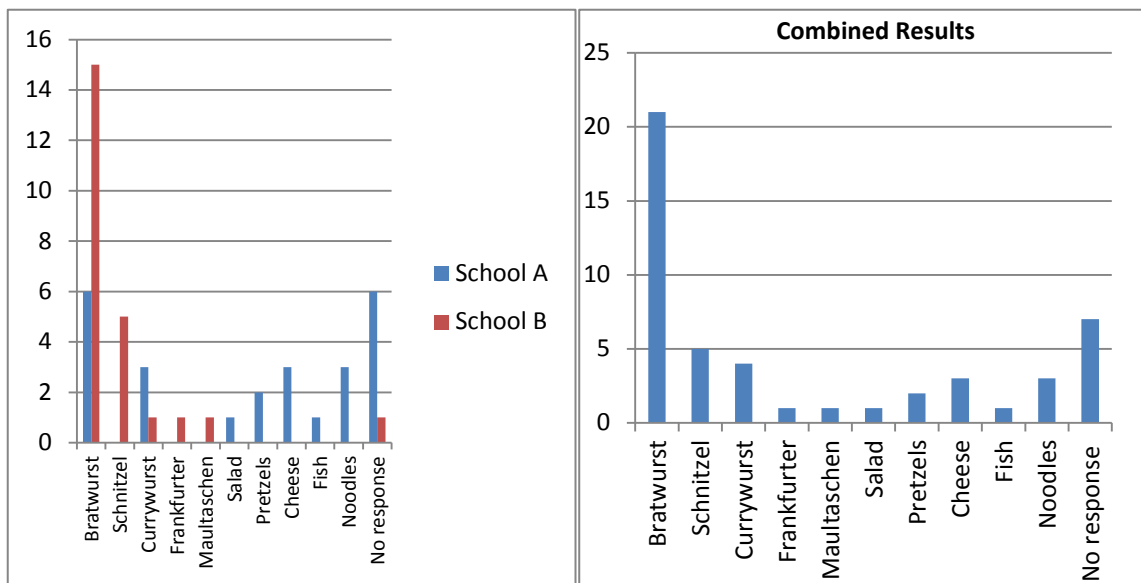
The first question invited the pupils to name a German food and 21 respondents out of 50 in total named a sausage or sausage dish (namely *Bratwurst* and *Currywurst*). Some respondents, particularly in School A, named foods in German successfully, with the correct article, yet these could not be interpreted to be specific to Germany. Perhaps the question is in itself challenging for the pupils, as German cuisine is not as renowned or easily accessible in the UK as, say, Spanish or Italian cuisine; there is simply no culture of German restaurants in the UK. It should be noted that over 80% of respondents named an item or type of food. Had the question been formulated as "a German dish" then probably fewer responses would have been produced, yet the sausage dishes would have been mentioned the most. It is also interesting to note that School B's range of responses was smaller than that of school A, but more specific to German cuisine itself, whereas School A's responses involved more foods which are eaten in Germany, rather than foods which Germany is particularly renowned for. In any case, foods represent an area of German culture which German teachers can highlight in their everyday teaching and which pupils do not necessarily have to travel to Germany to experience.

Figure 2. Responses to the request to name a German festival or national holiday

When asked to name a German festival, two pupils in School A named *Oktoberfest*. More pupils in School B put down answers which reflect festivals celebrated in Germany, rather than festivals specific to Germany. The lack of responses perhaps reflects the later emphasis on festivals in the syllabus.
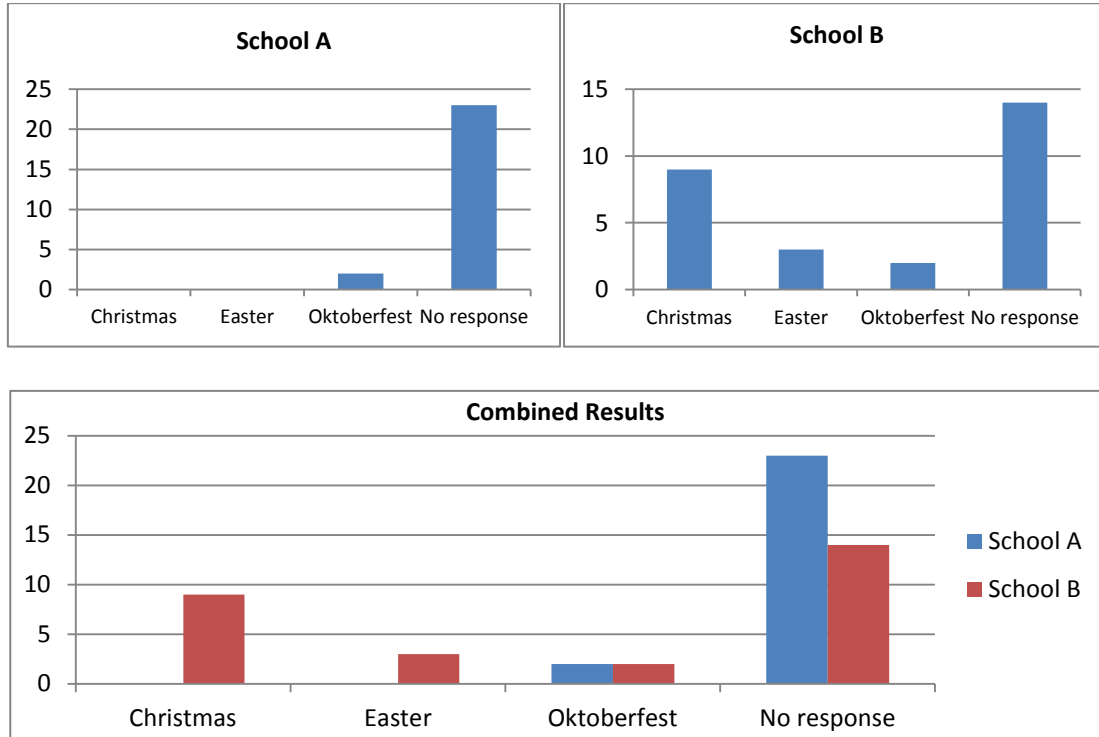
Although the festival of *Oktoberfest* is mentioned, one might expect *Karneval* to have been mentioned in the responses. Given that the survey was taken by children in the 11-14 age range, it could suggest that more could be done to promote knowledge of festivals specific to Germany.
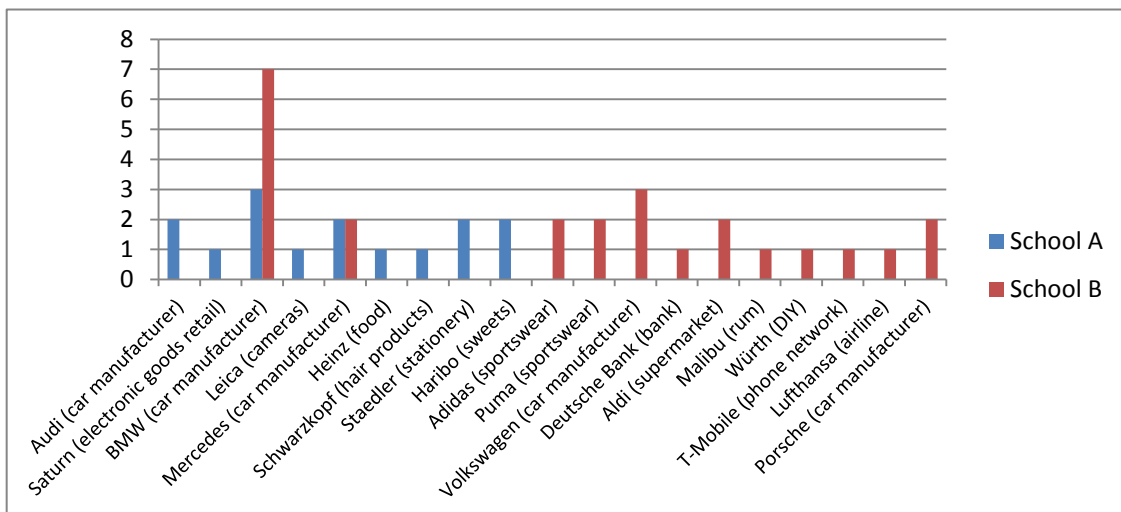
**Figure 3. Responses to the request to name a German brand**

Most completed responses named a car manufacturer as a German brand, which is what we expected. Two car manufacturers comprised the two brands which were mentioned in both groups of participants (*BMW*, *Mercedes*). In School A, a German electronics chain was mentioned, as well as a German camera company, a confectioner and a stationer. One response gave the Pennsylvania food manufacturer Heinz as a German brand, as its name could suggest a German origin. It is interesting to note that across the schools there were a wide range of brands mentioned by pupils, with all but one of the participants in School B managing to name one successfully. This could indicate that corporate Germany's transnational presence could be a powerful cultural reference for the German teacher to employ. This corporate transnational culture is something which Jones (2000: 162) identifies and something which German teachers can draw upon.

Figure 4. Responses to the request to name a German way of celebrating Christmas
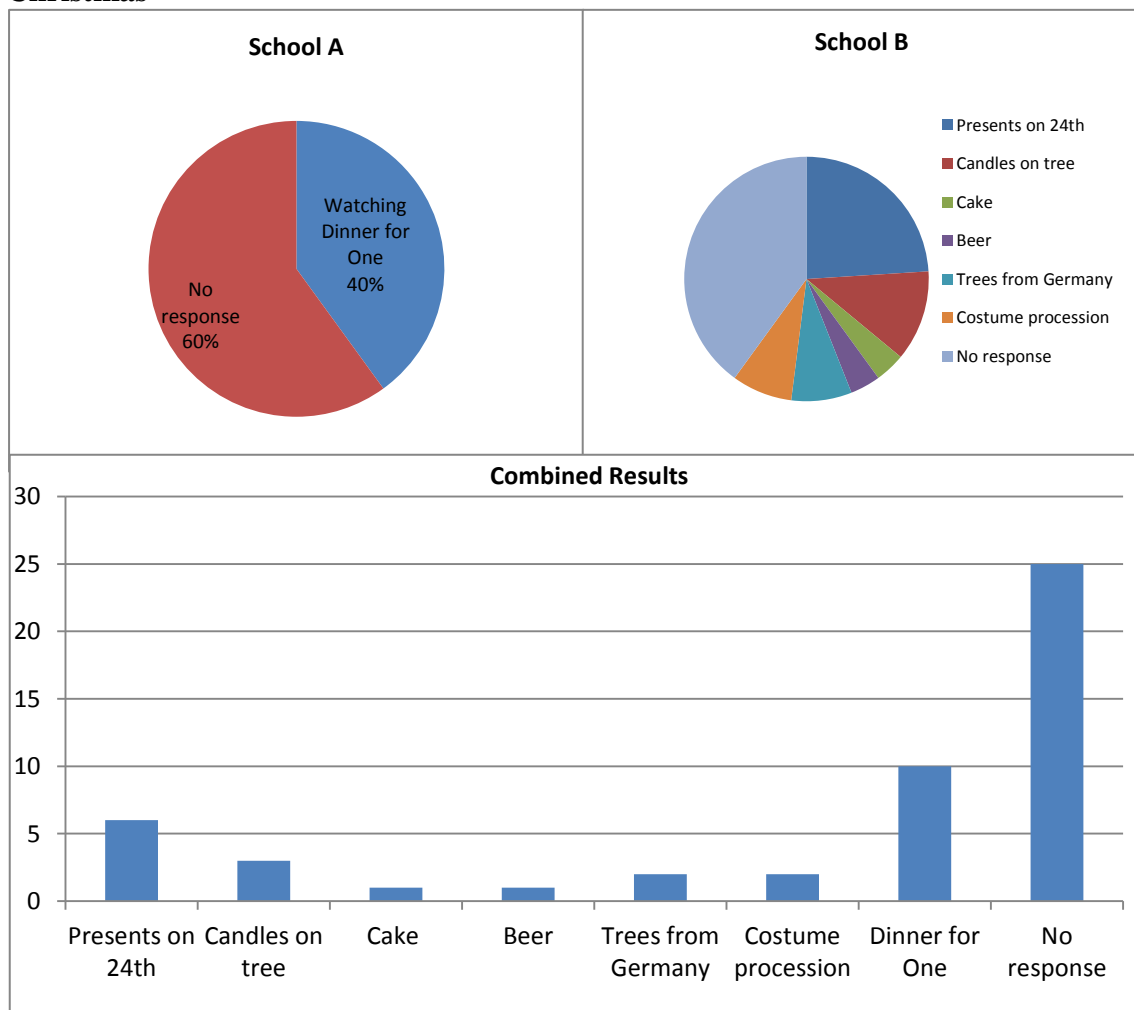
When the pupils were asked to name something German about Christmas celebrations, it was anticipated that they might have named a German Christmas food – often alluded to at KS3, e.g. *Stollen*, *Lebkuchen* – or the tradition of the German Christmas market, which can now be seen in the UK. However, ten pupils responded that the Germans watch the television programme *Dinner for One* at Christmas, whereas Germans actually watch it on New Year's Eve. Half of the respondents offered no answer and two responded with a 'costume procession'.
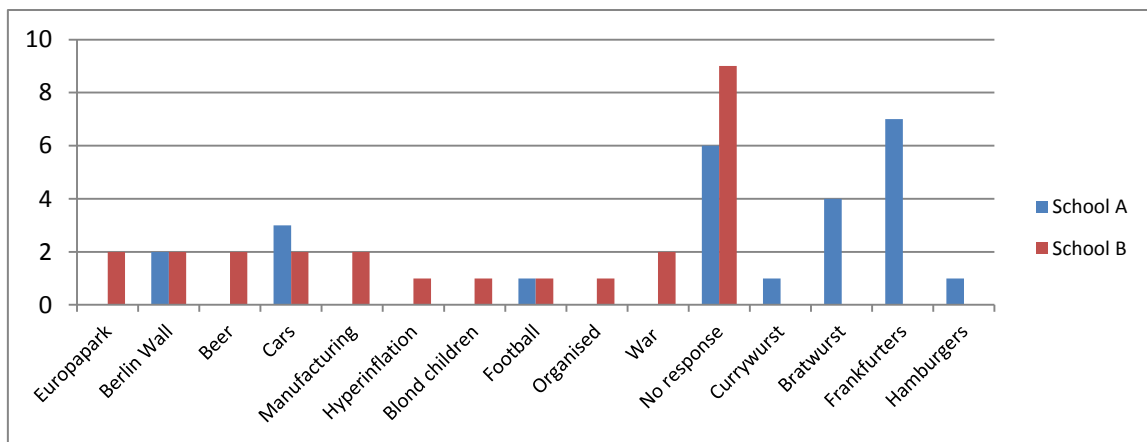
Figure 5. Responses to the request to name a famous German-speaking personality
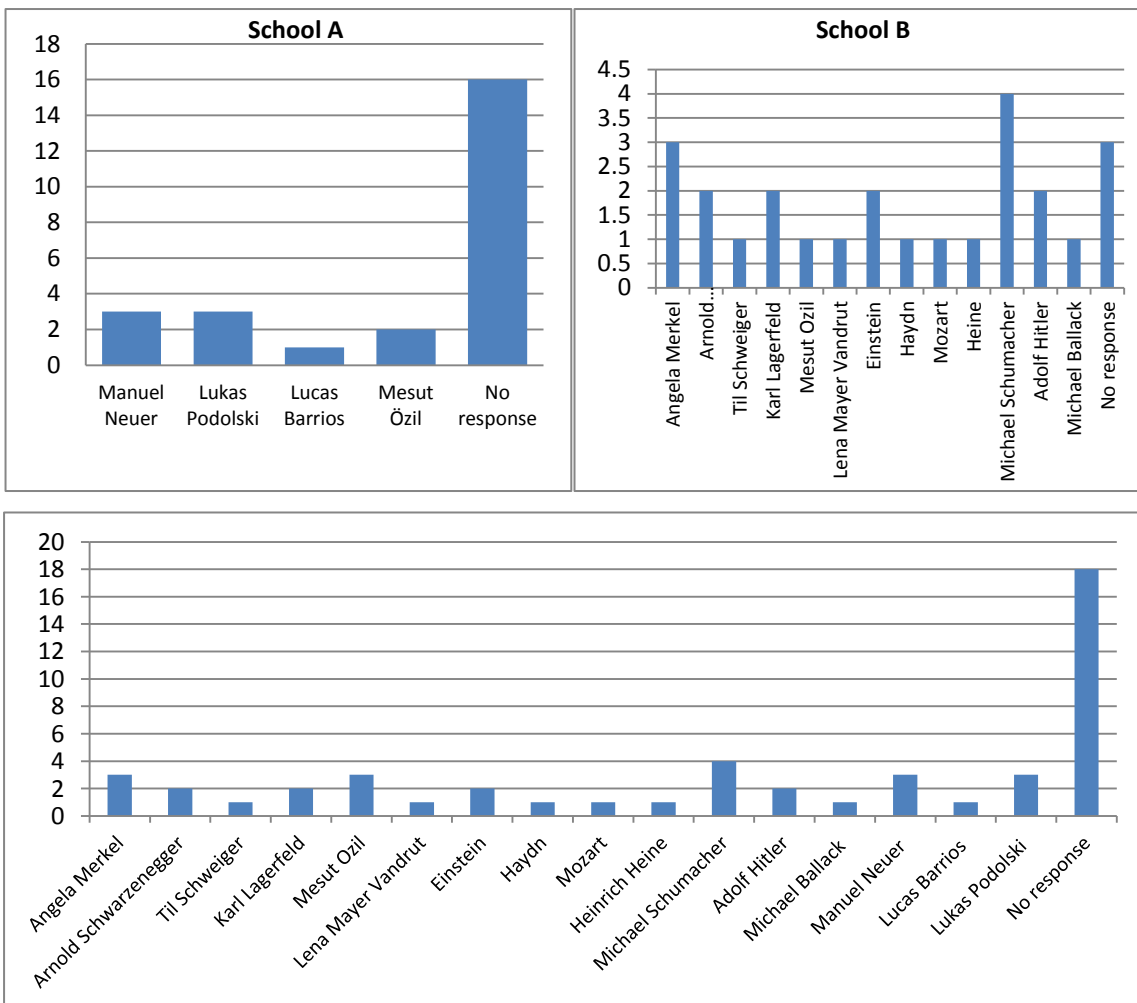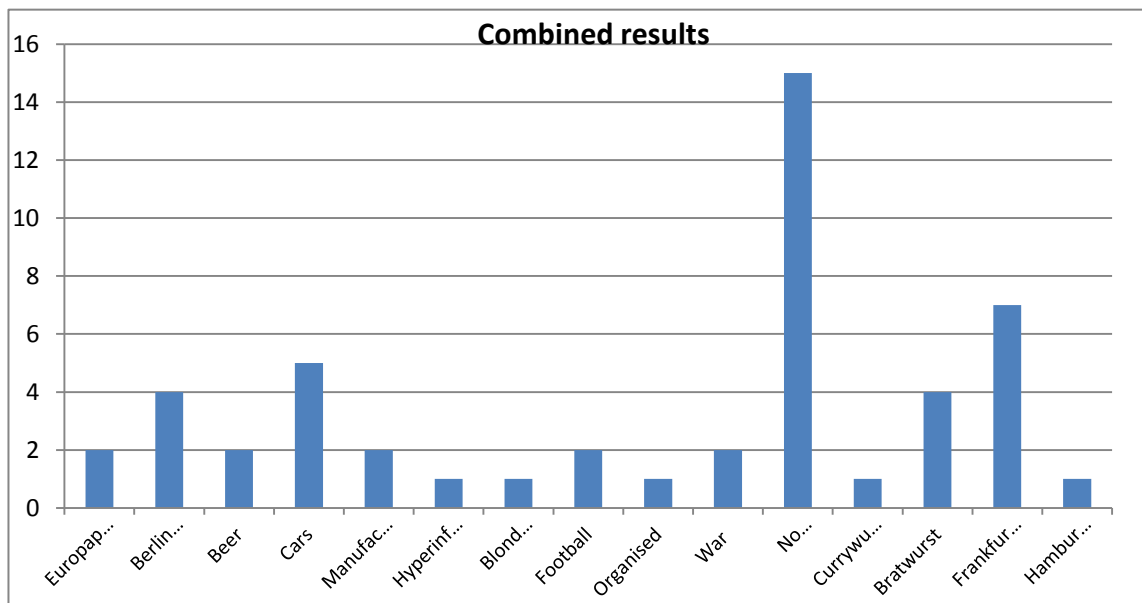

It is not surprising that participants in School A, which is a boys' school, should name footballers as famous Germans. However, the naming of footballers in the survey is interesting in that the multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural nature of the German football team is reflected in names such as Ballack, Podolski and Özil. We argue that it is a positive finding that pupils apparently look beyond such origins and regard these

people simply as Germans, and particularly so in the case of Mesut Özil who, despite being born in Germany, has had to defend his decision to play for the national team (FAZ 2012) and been described by the far-right NPD party as '*Plaste-Deutschen*' (Spiegelonline Politik 2009). The complexity of Turkish/German cultural identities is highlighted in this case (for more see: Kramsch 1998: 67). One respondent mentioned Lucas Barrios, a Paraguayan footballer, who plays for a German team (*Borussia Dortmund* at the time of writing). Although not a famous German, it is again positive that the pupil considered that he might be German and knew that he was based in Germany. School B offered a wider range of personalities and a larger proportion of School B's respondents came up with a famous German-speaking personality. It was interesting to see representatives of high culture (Heine, Mozart) as well as Angela Merkel, which could be a reflection of her prominence in recent years. Only two respondents put down Adolf Hitler, with Michael Schumacher having the most responses.

Figure 6: Responses to the request to name anything else that Germany is noted for

Combined results

Chart showing combined results with the following approximate values:
- Europap...: 2
- Berlin...: 4
- Beer: 2
- Cars: 5
- Manufac...: 2
- Hyperinf...: 1
- Blond...: 1
- Football: 2
- Organised: 1
- War: 2
- No...: 15
- Currywu...: 1
- Bratwurst: 4
- Frankfur...: 7
- Hambur...: 1

From the open question which came at the end of the questionnaire, the majority of responses showed a repetition of the areas covered in the previous questions, but also noted two other things – one being that Germany is renowned for car manufacturing, the other being that Germany was divided for some 40 years after the Second World War. It is important to consider that the Berlin Wall and the Cold War in general, whilst being a fundamental part of the formative experience of some older teachers, and at least known to many teachers through their own experiences and schooling, may not be familiar to many of the students that we teach. Pupils are often more knowledgeable about the Second World War than these later events. Pupils at both schools are aware of the Berlin Wall but may not realize its significance in German history. Other than these responses, there was a mixture of German characteristics (organization, manufacturing), produce (cars, food products) and historical phenomena (hyperinflation, the Berlin Wall).

How can this affect practice?

The survey shows that pupils can identify a range of German foods, people and brands, despite having learned German for a relatively short amount of time. This should encourage German teachers that pupils identify with aspects of German culture which are visible in the UK (German food in supermarkets, German brands, and German footballers). From the survey responses it is clear that these pupils, at least, have a grasp of the more positive elements of contemporary Germany, which teachers should be

emphasizing in the face of both enduring negative stereotypes and falling pupil numbers in terms of German language take-up and examination entry. Furthermore, it shows that in relation to the pupils there is already a significant basis of cultural *savoirs* (Byram 1997: 38) from which to build upon and increase cultural content in German lessons. Such knowledge could also be used beyond the classroom, such as in homework tasks (i.e. pupils could be asked to find what German products there are in the supermarket). The results of the survey are an encouraging sign that teachers have some resources with which they can revive enthusiasm for German in schools today.

Conclusion

In this article we have reviewed the status of German in the United Kingdom's secondary schools and highlighted the competition from other languages in the UK, such as Spanish, which could provide one explanation for the drop-off in examination entries for German. Through designing and conducting a small-scale research project, we have investigated the rationale for teaching German culture as a part of language lessons as one possible way to boost interest and motivation and help reverse the decline in pupil numbers, and in doing so, shed light on the current cultural knowledge and awareness of a sample of secondary school pupils. An overview of cultural references available to teachers shows more opportunities to introduce German culture than may be apparent at first glance. The article reflects the benefits such practice can bring to teaching and the need for teachers to be sponsors of target language culture in the first instance. Data gathered from this study into pupil knowledge of culture shows that pupils can recognize German corporations, personalities, foods and festivals, and that it is up to German teachers and their Departments to publicize this. Competition between German and other subjects for timetable space and pupil numbers seems set to continue; it would seem common sense for teachers to emphasize the cultural elements that pupils relate to in an effort to inspire and maintain interest in the subject. Arresting the declines that have occurred in the subject will not be an easy task, but it is the duty of German teachers to use culture in lessons to spark interest and revive enthusiasm for what is still an important foreign language.

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Appendix

Questionnaire:

The pupils participating in the questionnaire were asked to name, in order

1. A German food

2. A German festival or national holiday

3. A German way of celebrating Christmas

4. A German brand

5. A famous German-speaking person

6. Anything else Germany is noted for

Biographical details

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