

# Crossing the Atlantic, One Call at a Time

Innovative new program has students using Skype to improve their language skills and build international friendships



Photo: Greg Black, Queen's University

Queen's University professor Jennifer Hosek speaks to professor Marjorie Willey of Martin-Luther University in Halle, Germany to demonstrate their Skype learning program at the E2Quate conference last December.

By Patrick Faller

There's a new project at Queen's University that's got everyone talking.

The Skype tandem project, started last September by German studies professor Jennifer Hosek, may change the way foreign languages are taught in Canada.

Hosek said she first thought of the project when she noticed a lack of one-on-one speaking practice for second-year German students at Queen's.

Trying to find a solution to help students advance their language skills quicker, Hosek organized a partnership with English studies professor, Marjorie Willey at Martin-Luther University in Halle, Germany.

The two teachers paired up students in their classes for a special tutorial over the semester.

The task was simple; the two students would talk over Skype for two hours a week, one hour in English and one hour in German.

“One-on-one discussion with someone the same age with similar interests gives such an authentic engagement with the language and culture,” said Hosek.

“It just seemed like such an obvious idea that no one was doing.”

Hosek and Willey chose one relevant topic related to Canadian and European studies every week.

When the lectures were finished, students had to discuss the issue with their Skype partners.

The results were immense, said Hosek.

She noticed the students were less shy in the classroom, spoke more fluidly and showed genuine enthusiasm towards learning the language and culture.

“It’s important to get students learning how to speak on culturally rich topics. We create situations where students want to learn how to become adult communicators, because they don’t want to say things like ‘I brush my teeth’ when they’re talking to German students in German, they want to ask about the fall of the Berlin wall and what it means to them.”

Her students agreed.

A resounding number of participants responded very positively when asked what they thought about the Skype tandem project they took part in.

“It was just a very interesting view into German culture, I could never get that from a textbook,” said Meredith Nason, a third-year French studies student from Ottawa.

Nason spent the past semester discussing topics ranging from school systems to stereotypes with Maria Dolge, an English studies student in Halle.

The two became good friends and are already planning to meet one day face-to-face.

“I will definitely stay in touch with Maria. She is a great girl and we never, ever run out of things to talk about,” Nason said.

For some students, the Skype conversations not only improved their cultural understanding of Germany, but also empowered them to continue their studies abroad.

“The Skype project increased my confidence in German substantially and now I hope to study there in the coming year,” said Samuel Bozak, a Chemistry student from San Francisco, Calif.

“It was one of the best things I could’ve been part of,” he said.

It wasn’t just the Canadian students who raved about their experiences with the Skype project.

For many of the German students at Martin-Luther University, the experience was both a chance to improve their English skills and a rare opportunity to see how others view their own language and culture.

“Apart from the things I learnt about the Canadians, I learnt a lot about my own culture and how others perceive it,” said Franziska May, a concurrent education student who hopes to teach English one day.

“It was pretty interesting to see how others learn my language and what the difficulties are for them,” she said.

Like most German university students, Willey’s class already possessed excellent language skills, but the chance to improve their fluency through one-on-one contact with a native speaker proved to be invaluable.

“Talking to ‘real’ English-speaking people who are even our own age is one of the best ways I can think of to learn and improve a language,” said Michael Deckwerth, who is also studying concurrent education.

His professor Marjorie Willey shares the same feelings.

“When Jenn came to me I was sure it was a good idea and would be good for the students,” Willey said.

“The students learned so many social skills. They learned how to get on with somebody from a different culture while using their language actively on a one-to-one basis. I’m not sure you can get that kind of communication just in the classroom.”

Willey said she received some unexpected results as well.

She said her students began taking responsibility for their Skype partner’s language abilities, making sure that at least one hour of German was spoken every week and that their Canadian colleagues were constantly improving their speaking skills.

“They were all getting practice, perhaps without even realizing it.”

In addition to language acquisition, both Willey and Hosek said the project was a way to create an exchange of ideas between Canada and Europe.

“The Skype tutorial created such a connection for the students to contemporary Germany that it awakened so much interest,” said Hosek.

“I made it my business to make sure there were lots of hot topics in the classroom and encourage students to talk about them. Sometimes they talked about music but they were also talking about the unification of Germany.”

For Willey, the project proved to be an excellent opportunity to get students learning about Canada.

“The focus at university in Germany is very British and US-oriented. Most thought it would be interesting to meet some Canadians and most hit it off,” she said.

While both educators beam with pride when asked about the successes of the Skype tandem project, they both cite academic freedom as a determining force in whether such innovative projects can be run in the classroom.

“It was because of the academic freedom Queen’s gave me that I could teach my German class the way I thought it should be taught. This gave me the courage to bring technology into the process and do the Skype project,” said Hosek.

“It’s an idea that’s time has come.”