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Comparison of disruptive behaviours in South Australian LOTE and mainstream primary school classrooms

Janine Jung

*Trinity Anglican School
Kewarra Beach, Queensland, Australia*

Peter Boman

*James Cook University
Smithfield, Queensland, Australia*

Abstract

The frequencies of disruptive behaviours in students were compared between their respective LOTE (German) and mainstream primary school classrooms. Forty-nine students aged between nine and twelve, from years four to seven, were observed during the study. The overall frequency of disruptive behaviours in German classes was found to be significantly higher than in mainstream classes. Three of the four observed behaviours were also found to be more frequent in German classes. Some suggestions for improving teaching practice and future research have been made.

Introduction

Languages Other Than English (LOTE) is a key learning area in Australian schools (National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia 1993). Nine languages were initially targeted: German, French, Italian, Indonesian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Vietnamese, Spanish and Chinese. By 1997, in South Australia, 27 languages were being taught, including nine aboriginal languages (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 1997). More students (4688) were being taught German than any other LOTE. In total, 85% of primary school students were studying a language other than English and 81 primary schools had German as their LOTE, which was more than any other language.

The Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in South Australia supports the learning of a language other than English as an important facet in a child's development (DETE 2002). By developing knowledge of languages other than English, children can learn that they are part of a world in which a variety of languages are spoken, and develop an appreciation of their own culture and that of others. LOTE helps students 'to develop a sensitivity to the social conventions of different cultures, leading to effective participation in a multicultural world' (Ministry of Education 1988, p 15). Despite the importance placed upon learning another language, research into the study of these key languages appears to be very limited, with most studies focusing on students' attitudes (Holzknecht 1995; Jones 1995). These studies suggest that, in general, students find studying another language to be boring and difficult.

Notwithstanding these findings, there appears to be a lack of studies that report on possible disruptive behaviours that may occur as a result of these attitudes to learning another language. In fact, a search of ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), a database of over 750 educational journals, returned only one reference: Kingdon (1995).

Kingdon (1995) stated that disruptive behaviours in LOTE classrooms were of concern to teachers. An increasing number of referrals to the Behaviour Support Unit by South Australian Government LOTE teachers underpinned this report. The 13 LOTE teachers making these referrals attributed their concerns to the disruptive behaviour of students in their classrooms. The most frequent types of disruptive behaviour the teachers encountered were 'continual and persistent refusal to work', 'repeated interjections', 'harassment towards other students' and 'frequent refusal to follow basic teacher directions'. Though anecdotal in nature, Kingdon's article nevertheless highlights the types of behavioural problems that can exist in LOTE classrooms.

Researchers undertaking investigations into the types and frequencies of disruptive behaviours in mainstream classes, however, have identified a comprehensive list of common behaviours (Borg & Falzon 1989; Fields 1986; Jones et al 1995; Jones et al 1996; Lawrence & Steed 1986; Merrett & Wheldall 1984; Oswald et al 1997; Wheldall & Merrett 1988). In general, the majority of disruptive behaviours by students are 'of a mild nature relating to poor attention, persistent infringement of class rules and procedures, and inconsistent on-task behaviours' (Fields 1986, p 56).

In contrast, the results of a study by Borg & Falzon (1989) were conflicting. They indicated far more serious disruptive student behaviours such as 'stealing' and 'cruelty/bullying'. 'Disobedience' and 'talkativeness' were only ranked sixth and fourteenth, respectively. This research was conducted on two Mediterranean islands, Malta and Gozo, where specific cultural influences may have contributed to the disparity in findings.

Even though most disruptive behaviours are generally considered mild in nature, they still disrupt the flow of lessons, and this affects not only the 'disruptive' student but also the teacher and other students (Oswald 1995).

This drain on class time reduces students' time-on-task, which has been found to adversely affect their academic achievement (Cobb 1972; Good & Brophy 1997; McKinney et al 1975; Rowe 1988; Smyth 1984). These researchers have reported how, if students have less time-on-task, a lower level of achievement often results.

While there is consensus in the research that disruptive behaviour is a problem in mainstream classes, corresponding research into LOTE classes is lacking. Nevertheless, the anecdotal evidence about frequencies of misbehaviour in LOTE classes suggests that levels of academic achievement must be negatively affected. This may ultimately affect the long-term viability of the compulsory study of a LOTE in schools.

Regardless of the emphasis placed upon studying a language other than English, this relative lack of research into disruptive behaviours in LOTE classes needed addressing. The researchers undertaking the following study observed German LOTE classes in order to measure the frequency of disruptive behaviours by students. The behaviour of these same students was also observed in their mainstream classrooms. The researchers then examined the frequencies of disruptive behaviours between the two classrooms, to determine if there were any significant differences. Due to the perception by students that studying LOTE is boring and difficult, it was predicted that students in LOTE classrooms would exhibit greater frequencies of disruptive behaviours than in mainstream ones.

Method

Participants

To avoid any possible 'teacher effects', participants were chosen as part of a convenience sample taught both LOTE German and mainstream classes by the same teacher. To reflect the general procedure in most South Australian LOTE primary classrooms, it was necessary that the sample students were taught German in a classroom specifically allocated for German classes. Although these criteria made it difficult to locate suitable classrooms, as researchers, we felt that it would strengthen the study design.

As a result, only three government primary schools in metropolitan Adelaide (South Australia) were found to be suitable. School A taught two languages other than English, and parents could nominate which language they preferred their child to learn; whereas in schools B and C, only one language, German, was offered. Each school catered for the education of students from reception to year 7. Only students from years 4–7 were included in the study sample from each school. The students ranged in age from nine to twelve years.

Procedures

Eighty-eight consent forms were distributed to parents/guardians between the three schools. Fifty-three students returned consent forms and, of those returned, 49 students (25 male and 24 female) were granted parental

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permission to be a part of the study. A return rate of 60% was therefore achieved. This was an acceptable response rate, as many school-based studies requiring parental consent often result in a participation rate of 50% or less (Dent et al 1997). Table 1 presents the sample's composition.

Table 1: Total student numbers by year level and school

	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7
School A	12	0	0	0
School B	0	0	6	15
School C	0	12	4	0
Total	12	12	10	15

A naturalistic observation technique was devised to collect data on actual student behaviour. The greatest asset of using an observational technique is that it yields data directly from the natural surroundings in which the typical behaviours occur (Burns 1995; Malim & Birch 1997; Porter 1996; Sinclair & Dickson 1997). All too often, as discovered in the behavioural studies reviewed earlier, too many techniques used by researchers depend solely on the retrospective reports or perceptions of individuals' own behaviours or those of others. This study ensured that the classroom situations in each school remained as typical as possible, such that the data reflected was a truer representation of the students' characteristic behaviours.

Another common criticism of this type of study is the lack of precise operational definitions of observable behaviours. This may cause confusion for the observers and, therefore, affect the reliability of the data (Gelfand & Hartmann 1975). The problem was diminished in this study by carefully labelling all general types of behaviours and listing the specific behaviours associated with them. Inter-rater reliability checks were also conducted prior to formal visits, to guarantee that the two independently working observers recorded the same behaviours under the same categories, therefore ensuring reliability. These pre-study visits also enabled the students to become accustomed to the observers, to help limit any possible change in their behaviour due to the presence of other people in the classroom.

The researchers chose to observe four disruptive behaviours: 'idleness and work avoidance', 'talking out of turn', 'being out of seat', and 'not following teacher's instructions'. These disruptive behaviours were among those most commonly identified in South Australian junior primary (reception-year 2) and primary schools (years 3-7) (Johnson et al 1993). They were also among those identified in similar research on disruptive behaviour in classrooms (eg Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office 1989; Jones et al 1996; Kingdon 1995; Merrett & Wheldall 1984; Miller 1996; Oswald et al 1997).

The observers used a tally sheet to record the student observations. Each student was observed on a rotational basis of 20-second intervals. Time was measured using a watch with a clock face; therefore observations took

place at 0, 20 and 40 seconds. A total of eleven observations of each student were made in each session. This was calculated from the number of times that each researcher could observe 12 subjects in a 45-minute class, on the basis of three observations per minute. This amounted to 33 observations per participant in both German and mainstream classes. Only 31 of the 49 subjects were present for all 33 observations in each classroom. These data only were used in the analyses of mean raw scores.

Results

Figure 1 presents the total disruptive behaviours observed in both German and mainstream classes. More disruptive behaviours were exhibited on average over the 33 individual observations by each student in the German classes (mean = 8.4) compared to the same students in mainstream classes (mean = 6.0). Effectively, this means that in the German classes, the 31 observed students exhibited an extra 74 disruptive behaviours over the three observational periods.

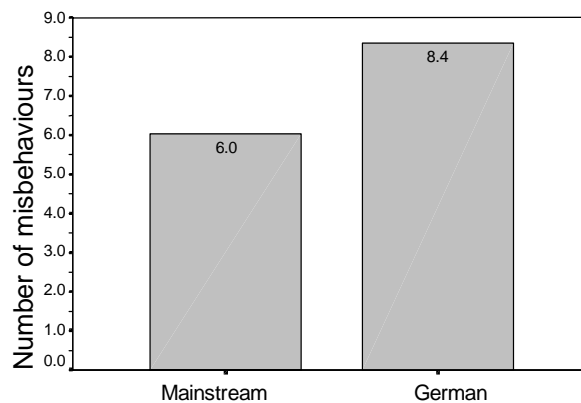


Figure 1. Disruptive behaviours in German and mainstream classrooms (n = 31)

A paired-samples t-test was conducted on the above figures and the analysis indicated significance ($t(31) = 2.73, p = 0.010$). The eta squared statistic (.20) indicated a large effect size. (Note: Cohen (1988) suggested the following guidelines: .01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, .14 = large effect). This analysis, however, includes only those students (31 of the original 49) for whom a complete data set existed.

Twelve of the 18 students without complete data sets were observed in two of the three possible observational periods. Researchers were able to include data from these 12 in additional analyses by using the percentage of disruptive behaviour as the dependent variable. A paired-samples t-test was used on this larger sample (n = 43). The mean percentage of disruptive behaviour in German was 25.38%, which was significantly higher than the corresponding percentage in the mainstream classes at 17.9% ($t(43) = 12.78,$

$p = 0.001$). The eta squared statistic (.79) indicated a large effect size; that is, a substantial difference in the percentages of disruptive behaviours.

An interesting observation also arose from the above data. It appeared that students who exhibited disruptive behaviours in German classes tended to show similar disruptive behaviours in mainstream classes. A Pearson Product Moment Correlation between the proportion of disruptive behaviour exhibited by students in German classes and the proportion in corresponding mainstream classes found this to be true ($r = .515$, $n = 43$, $p < .000$). This accounted for 26.5% of the variance. Figure 2 represents the results of the correlation in the form of a scatter plot. On this plot, the scales are expressed as ratios (where .1 = 10%, .2 = 20%, etc).

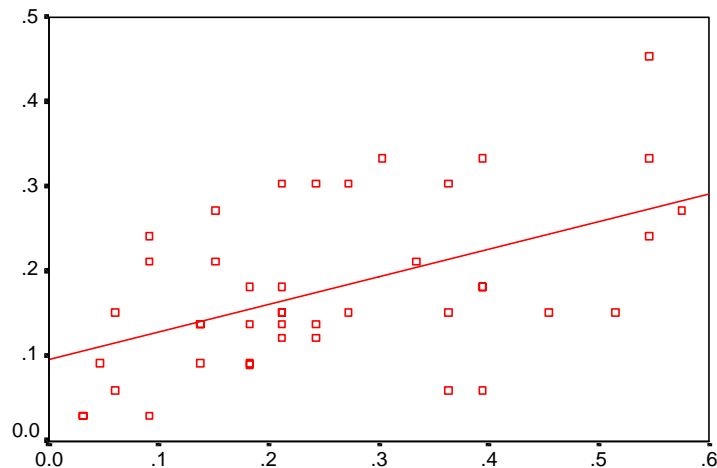


Figure 2. Correlation between German and mainstream disruptive behaviours ($n = 43$)

The frequencies of the types of disruptive behaviours observed in German and mainstream classes are shown in Table 2. The types of disruptive behaviour most frequently observed in German and mainstream classes differed slightly. The results indicated that ‘talking out of turn’ was most frequent in German classes, while ‘idleness and work avoidance’ was the second most frequent. This order was reversed in mainstream classes. ‘Not following teacher instructions’ and ‘being out of seat’ were third and fourth most frequent in both classes.

Table 2: Mean frequency of disruptive behaviour in German and mainstream classes

	Idleness and work avoidance	Talking out of turn	Being out of seat	Not following teacher instructions
German	2.43	2.64	0.68	2.07
Mainstream	2.39	1.64	0.25	1.36

Paired-samples t-tests were then used to measure whether the frequencies of disruptive behaviours were significantly different between German and mainstream classes. Significance was achieved with ‘talking out of turn’ ($t(31) = 2.64, p = .027$); ‘being out of seat’ ($t(31) = 2.27, p = .016$); and ‘not following instructions’ ($t(31) = 2.05, p = .05$). However, ‘idleness and work avoidance’ ($t(31) = .067, p = 0.474$) was not significant. The eta squared statistics were .19, .15 and .12 respectively. That is, large effect sizes were found for ‘talking out of turn’ and ‘being out of seat’, while ‘not following instructions’ reflected a moderate effect size.

Discussion

It was found that the frequency of disruptive behaviours by students in German classes was significantly higher than in mainstream classes. Data analyses also indicated that students who exhibited a high frequency of disruptive behaviour in German classes also exhibited a high frequency in mainstream classes. The results indicated that the frequency of the four types of disruptive behaviours in German and mainstream classes differed slightly as well.

‘Talking out of turn’ was the most frequent in German classes, while ‘idleness and work avoidance’ was ranked second. The reverse was found to be the case in mainstream classes. ‘Not following teacher instructions’ and ‘being out of seat’ were third and fourth in the German and mainstream classes respectively. ‘Idleness and work avoidance’ was the only disruptive behaviour that did not differ significantly in frequency between German and mainstream classes.

These findings concur with the results of a study conducted by Miller (1996) in German classrooms. Her study indicated that disruptive behaviours included ‘talking’, ‘not being on task’, and ‘walking around’. Kingdon’s (1995) article, which reported on the most frequent types of disruptive behaviours in 13 South Australian LOTE teachers’ classrooms, further supported these results. The most frequent types of disruptive behaviours encountered by the teachers were ‘repeated interjections’, ‘continual and persistent refusal to work’, and ‘frequent refusal to follow basic teacher directions’. Neither Miller nor Kingdon measured the frequency of disruptive behaviours, as their data were either qualitative or anecdotal.

However, the frequencies of students' disruptive behaviours in mainstream classrooms have been investigated in international studies (Alley et al 1990; Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office 1989; Jones et al 1995; Jones et al 1996; Lawrence & Steed 1986; Merrett & Wheldall 1984; Wheldall & Merrett 1988). Similar types of disruptive behaviours such as 'talking out of turn', 'work avoidance', 'idleness', 'disobedience', and 'being out of seat' have been reported to occur more frequently. Australian research has also, in the main, supported the findings of this study (Burke & Jarman 1994; Johnson et al 1993; Oswald et al 1997). These studies ranked 'talking out of turn', 'idleness and work avoidance', and 'getting out of seat' as being among the most common and frequent types of disruptive behaviours.

The results of this study have indicated that even though the types of disruptive behaviours are similar in German and mainstream classes, they are more frequent in the former. Disruptive behaviours in any classroom detract from students' time-on-task, and this in turn has a negative effect on their learning and academic achievement.

There may be a temptation for educators to see the level of these disruptive behaviours as merely a discipline problem, but this is not always the case. Student disruptive behaviour can often be a by-product of inappropriate learning activities (Smyth 1985). However, it must be noted that the more disruptive students from the mainstream classroom were also the most disruptive in German classes. As the number of disruptive behaviours by these students increased, it can be assumed that their behaviour was still more problematic for their teacher in the language class than in the mainstream classroom.

Therefore, to improve student attitudes and behaviours, it may be necessary to modify the manner in which German is taught in schools. The use of inappropriate learning activities could be reflected in the fact that students generally find studying a language to be boring and difficult (Holzknecht 1995; Jones 1995). In essence, learning a language other than English may lack meaning and relevance to students with English as a first language. Learning needs an apparent connection to prior knowledge and the real world for it to be successful (Eggen & Kauchak, 1994).

Therefore, a reassessment of the teaching methodology and content of LOTE subjects may be necessary. Some studies have suggested that the use of cooperative group work and technology such as CD-ROMS may be helpful in language classrooms (Magee 1999; Walker 1998). Magee found that, in using group work with language CD-ROMS, 'very little computer and behaviour problems occurred in class' (1999, p 28). She believed the use of such programs maintained the interest of students who were readily bored and likely to misbehave. However, it was also important that the language programs were user friendly. Using these programs may have a positive effect not only on the behaviour of students, but also on their attitude to studying another language. However, access to this technology may not be available to all language teachers.

In general, students need to be in a stimulating environment, incorporating appropriate learning activities such as group work, if the benefits of studying another language are to be realised. However, the authors also believe – from anecdotal stories told to them by classroom teachers – that, as reported by other researchers (Holzknecht 1995; Jones 1995; Kleinsasser 2001), students tend to find learning a LOTE subject difficult and boring. Developing a strong sense of relevance for language learning may also be important in helping to change attitudes and subsequent disruptive student behaviour.

The results of this study have raised pertinent issues for discussion and further research. However, the study was restricted due to certain conditions that were out of the researchers' control, and which need to be acknowledged. The purposive nature of the sample has limited the generalisability of the results. The sample was restricted for the following reasons, as noted in the methodology: it was necessary for the subjects to be studying German as their LOTE; for the teacher of German to be a part-time German specialist and part-time mainstream teacher; for the mainstream classes to be taught in the same classroom; and for German to be taught in a specifically designated German classroom.

Another limitation was the sample size and the age of the subjects. The small sample size means that the results of this research cannot be generalised to other students. It was not possible for the researchers to hold constant the year level of the students as a variable across the three schools involved in the study. The above requirement – that the teacher be a German and a mainstream classroom teacher – made it impossible to ensure all subjects were in the same year level. This prevented the researchers from comparing year levels between the three schools.

Overall, this study has revealed a significant difference in the frequencies of disruptive behaviours in German classes compared to mainstream ones. However, future research should be focused on an investigation of disruptive behaviours in other language classes. This will help to determine whether the German language is especially difficult for students or whether learning any LOTE subject generally produces more disruptive behaviours in students. It would also be helpful to further examine the attitudes of students – and even those of teachers and parents – to language learning, to help illuminate the issues of meaning and relevance.

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