

## Forschung und Lehre

# SpEAKing: Language Skills as a Key for Contemporary Research on Southeast Asia

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### Summary

In order to connect language learning and other classes and to enhance the quality of language classes, the SpEAKing project at the Department for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Bonn consists of four parts: digitalization of language learning materials, eTandems in cooperation with Universities in Southeast Asia, a module which combines Thai classes with classes on social and political issues in Thailand, and research practices classes together with Students from Southeast Asian Universities.

**Keywords:** cooperative learning, intercultural learning, digitalization, language learning, Southeast Asia

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## **Introduction**

A main advantage of area studies as a subject in universities is that language teaching can be integrated into classes on topical issues that the respective departments are dealing with (Platt 2006). In the case of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at Bonn University, for instance, these issues include human-environment relations and labor networks, on which we regularly offer courses. Language skills are necessary for understanding social dynamics in the countries we are dealing with. This distinguishes area studies from, for instance, political or social sciences, which might also deal with the areas in question, but in which students and scholars often have to acquire language skills on their own. Our aim is to enable students to eventually use their language skills for their own research. The SpEAKing project aims to better integrate language classes and the contents of other courses. It also fosters digital learning methods as well as cooperative learning through tandem language learning and research exchange for students. The project is funded by the University of Bonn for three years and started in October 2021. SpEAKing consists of four pillars, namely digitalization of language classes, tandem learning, a new module on Thai language and society, as well as research exchange. The project will be accompanied by evaluations and feedback from students in order to measure the impacts of these pillars on learning progress and student' satisfaction.

## **Digitalization of language teaching materials**

For a few semesters, our department has digitalized most of the teaching material for Vietnamese classes. In addition to mandatory texts, vocabulary cards and assignments there are voluntary assignments for further study that students can access online. These additional assignments fit with the respective teaching unit. Digitalization came in handy during the coronavirus pandemic, and it can complement and in part replace traditional textbooks. We aim to implement such digitalization for Indonesian classes as well over the coming semesters. Our aim is a blended learning concept (Quade 2017) that relies on in-classroom teaching, but that also makes some digital elements obligatory for the classes and offers additional material in order to motivate the students toward further study.

## **Tandem learning**

In order to improve speaking skills we have started to integrate tandem learning sessions into our Indonesian teaching courses. We cooperate with the German Department of the Padjajaran University in Bandung, Indonesia, and use Zoom as a tool. Tandem learning will also be implemented for Vietnamese in the coming semesters. Our aim here is to enable the students to become capable of communicating in everyday situations and to get accustomed to talking to and understanding native speakers. The tandem classes are guided by both the teaching

staff from our department and our Southeast Asian counterparts. Topics for each session are given in advance so that the students can prepare. During the tandem sessions, teachers enter the breakout rooms and, if necessary, support and guide the students. Later, the tandem partners meet on their own and prepare presentations for the whole group. They are encouraged to use photos and other visual material which has been proven to be effective support. In this format, cultural understanding aligns with linguistic skills as we aim to improve the intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997, 71) of both German and Southeast Asian students.

### **Research exchange**

In the research exchange, students from Southeast Asia visit our department in Bonn and students from Bonn visit students from Southeast Asia in order to conduct joint research projects that they prepare together. About five to seven students from a partner university in Southeast Asia visit the Department of Southeast Asia Studies at Bonn University during the summer semester and five to seven students (preferably those with high-level language skills) visit our partner universities in Southeast Asia during the winter semester. This is another opportunity to apply language skills. In the upcoming semester, we will start a research exchange with the Department of Anthropology at Universitas Indonesia in Depok, followed by research exchange with Universities in Vietnam and Thailand. Beside intercultural communicative competence, students can improve their intercultural awareness, especially in engaging with cultural informants and in intercultural communication both face-to-face and online (Baker 2011, 7).

### **Module on Thai language and social issues in Thailand**

Thai will be another language that we will offer in our department from 2022 onward. Thai classes are integrated into teaching modules which also cover political and ecological issues in Thailand. In this regard we also cooperate with teaching staff from universities in Thailand in order to explore trans-cultural teaching methods. With three languages, we aim to make our degree program more appealing for people who want to study Southeast Asian Studies. We intend to offer research exchange seminars later when the students have acquired some Thai language skills.

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