SNAPSHOT OF MATERIALS IN USE
IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Lessons from Bremen, Germany: The Bremen town musicians recomposed

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La carte (French for 'the menu')[1]

Whether or not you have taken beginner-level Québécois French in a large college classroom in Vancouver, Canada – as I did in the early 1990s – you may have heard of *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten (The Town Musicians of Bremen)*. This well-loved fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm has been translated into many languages and is still popular around the world. In this classic tale, a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster, team up on a bold adventure, dreaming of a new life as musicians in Bremen.

The formal learning environment where I used this popular story was not a large college class in multicultural Vancouver. Rather, it was a small private school in a bike-friendly city in northern Germany— the same city where American jazz pianist Keith Jarrett recorded his legendary solo piano concert in 1973. There, I was assigned a total of four small German as an Additional Language classes, from Year 4 to 7. For reasons of space, this article focuses only on the small Year 6 group, whose young language learners/users (YLLs) were aged 11 to 12.

This class, like the other three, was made up of YLLs from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While none shared the same L1, all had a positive attitude toward learning German as an Additional Language and valued their rich cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Unlike the mandatory *Deux Mondes* hardcover textbook required for the non-conversation component in my college L2 class, my German colleagues and I were not required to plan our lessons around a single coursebook. Interestingly, many of the points Ghosn (2016) makes about the unsuitability of coursebooks for very young

L2 learners also seem to apply to this context.

Inspired by the school's strong reading culture and holistic ethos, I started exploring more flexible and creative approaches to second language acquisition (SLA). These views aligned more closely with my own experience as an L2 user, my pedagogical beliefs, and my evolving understanding of current theories of language learning and neuroscience (see, for example, Immordino-Yang, 2016). Approaches such as extensive reading, language through literature, TPR Plus, the Text-Driven Approach (TDA) outlined by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2021) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), outlined, for example, by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2021), Shintani (2016), and Ellis & Shintani (2013) offered an appealing alternative to more rigid and predictable models. These traditional models include, for example, the PPP (Presentation–Practice–Production) sequence and forms-focused approaches 'that follow an inventory of forms to teach in a predetermined order' (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2021, p. 109). Unfortunately, I have observed repeatedly across my classroom experience in Germany, Peru, Canada, the UK, and Saudi Arabia that such traditional approaches appear to continue to shape most of the L2 learning materials currently in use.

Fortunately, with no set coursebook assigned to my class, I had the freedom to develop alternatives that aligned more closely with the school's strong reading culture, holistic ethos, and my own pedagogical preferences. These alternatives included a blend of authentic print-based reading materials – such as picture audiobooks – and a series of multimodal graded readers published by the ELi Publishing Group in Italy. Meaningful stories, and the themes embedded in them, according to Cameron (2001, p. 159) 'represent

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1. See Appendix A for a musical playlist designed to evoke a unique mood and atmosphere before, while, or after reading this article.

holistic approaches to language teaching and learning that place a high premium on children's involvement with rich, authentic uses of the foreign language.'

This article highlights *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*, a multimodal graded reader adapted by Suett and Vitelli (2017). This CEFR A1 story belongs to the *Erste ELi Lektüren* collection, which, like others in this ELi collection, is part of a broader collection aimed at YLLs at CEFR levels A0 to A2.

Paired with thoughtful teacher adaptation, this multimodal graded reader offered several potential engaging elements for my YLLs: powerful storytelling, colourful illustrations, catchy songs (for a discussion of the use of music in the FL classroom, see Davis, 2017; Degrave, 2019; Dolean, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2024), and the reading while listening (RWL) format. As Vallbona (personal communication, February 16, 2025) notes, RWL 'allows young learners to read books that they would not be able to read without the oral support. It also regulates their reading pace (some students tend to go through the book too quickly).' These and other benefits are further supported in Blum et al. (1995), Chang (2012), Chang and Millett (2015), Kartal (2017), Koskinen et al. (1997), Robb and Ewert (2024); Tragant and Vallbona (2018) and Webb and Chang (2012).

By teacher adaptation, I meant that I adapted many of the language activities included in this fairy tale to better align with my preference for holistic approaches to SLA. This echoes the emphasis on user adaptation in Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018), where they define materials adaptation as tailoring materials to make them more appropriate for the learning and teaching environment.

This multimodal article is structured around a metaphorical menu - *la carte*, in French. In the first section, *L'entrée* ("starter"), I highlight a holistic approach to SLA that was new to me: TDA. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021, p. 53) define this approach as 'a learner-centred, experiential approach in which a core authentic text is selected for its potential to engage, and which then drives the activities in the classroom, rather than a syllabus or a predetermined language - or skills-teaching point.' First outlined by Tomlinson (1994) and further developed in later works by Tomlinson (such as 1998, 2018a, 2018b) and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021), TDA helped me rethink how multimodal stories like this one could form the basis for open-ended, meaning-focused tasks in a range of formats and delivery modes: from AI (artificial intelligence) -assisted songwriting and edutainment multiplayer games to pencil-and-paper tasks and classroom drama.

When it came to developing digitally-based tasks for this multimodal graded reader, the participatory spirit of TDA also encouraged me to think of a new metaphor that could build on the discussion initiated by Stevenson (2008) well before the integration of AI in the L2 language classroom. In his paper, Stevenson outlines four commonly used metaphors for the use of digital technology in pedagogical settings: tutor, tool, environment, and resource.

The next section, *Le plat principal* ("main course") walks the reader through how I applied this approach during a five-day learning cycle with my small L2 class. Reflecting the informal, iterative nature of teacher-led action research advocated by Beck (2017), a new learning cycle followed, this time built around another potentially engaging story as the core class text.

L'entrée ('starter')

As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) point out, 'Research in the field of second or foreign language acquisition is relatively new and no one theory of at least 40 available...is universally accepted.' (Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) in García-Carbonell et al. (2001, p. 481). This wide range of theories likely reflects the complexity of L2 learning - something underscored, for instance, by the 20 factors that Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021) identify as influencing intake. Fortunately, Lightbown and Spada (2013) help bring some order to the complex issue raised by Larsen-Freeman and Long by outlining six *proposals for teaching*, each informed by various SLA theories.

Reflecting on my own beliefs and experiences as an L2 learner in Vancouver, I was also guided by Lightbown and Spada's (2013) teacher questionnaire. This last encourages L2 teachers to critically examine their own experiences and assumptions about how languages are best learned and taught. Through this reflection, I found that many of the creative learning propositions discussed in Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021) resonated better with me than Lightbown and Spada's *six proposals for teaching*. These insights, shaped further by my readings and my immediate learning and teaching context, confirmed my preference for holistic, creative, and flexible approaches to SLA.

In other words, had I been assigned an English as an Additional Language (EAL) class rather than German, I would have also gravitated toward creative approaches that emphasize a blend of storytelling, music, and drama. I would also continue to explore a particularly appealing pedagogical combination: Tomlinson's TDA and the learning model described by Bhasker and Prabhu in *English through Reading* (1974).

Prabhu – who Maley (2025, p. 127) calls 'the godfather of TBL [Task-Based Learning]' – describes his approach as one in which 'the subconscious process of learning a language is active when the learner's mind is consciously engaged in intellectually challenging tasks, which call for the use of language (Bhasker & Prabhu, 1974, p. 1).

A second appealing pedagogical combination I would continue to explore is Tomlinson's TDA and the drama-based pedagogy known as process drama, as outlined in Piazzoli (2018). Haseman and O'Toole (2017, p. viii) define process drama as follows:

> *Process drama is an improvised form of drama in which you construct a coherent dramatic story with yourselves as the character in that story. It is a powerful way to explore, through experience, all of the elements of drama. This approach brings mind, body, emotions, imagination and memories into the classroom to shape and deepen your learning.*

As pointed out in *La carte*, the supplementary activities presented in the next section, *Le plat principal*, are grounded in my understanding of Tomlinson's TDA. These activities also meet most of the criteria that Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021, p. 139) identify as facilitating intake in L2 materials. For example, they 'offer achievable challenges, stimulate personal responses, offer choice, encourage interaction and give scope for creativity'.

Spoiler alert: none of these supplementary activities rely on planned explicit instruction of either written or *conversational grammar* (Rühlemann, 2010). Writing for *Prima*, a magazine published in Germany that specializes in German as a Foreign Language in primary education, Piepho (1997, p. 45) reminds us that:

> *Children between the ages of six and twelve do not require explicit instruction in grammar, as they intuitively absorb, store, and apply syntactic resources and structural patterns. A language course designed for this age group should certainly not include sequentially organized, grammar-focused chapters. [my translation]*

Le plat principal ('main course')

This section outlines a sample sequence of supplementary activities designed for a five-day learning cycle built around the multimodal reader *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*, as adapted by Suett and Vitelli (2017). Each 50-minute lesson ran from Monday to Thursday, with a double period on Thursday and no L2 classes scheduled for me on Friday. An overview of these activities is provided below, followed by a more detailed description.

Overview of activities

Day 1 (Monday)

- Task-free dramatic reading activity: *Wortsport* (Word games)
- Extended pre-reading activity (Option 1): *My Storybook / Book Creator*
- Extended pre-reading activity (Options 2 and 3): Adapted *Kamishibai*

Day 2 (Tuesday)

- Reading while listening (RWL) picturebook session 1 (without group miming)
- While-Reading activity: YLLs-led dance choreography competition
- Post-Reading activity: *Suno* AI songwriting

Day 3 (Wednesday)

- Animated picturebook viewing (session 1)
- Reader's Theatre with alternative endings

Day 4 (Thursday)

- Reading while listening (RWL) picturebook session 2 with group miming
- Task-free music immersion
- Poster, front cover, or advertisement design

Day 5 (Monday)

- Recap of *Wortsport* riddles
- *Blooket* online quiz creation and multiplayer gameplay as formative peer assessment.

Daily activity breakdown

Day 1 (Monday)

'Task-free' dramatic reading activity: *Wortsport*

This is an example of an input-rich activity that is not tied to an explicit comprehension task (based on Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2021). At the beginning of the lesson, I posted on the board four enlarged and laminated animal-themed riddles that were accompanied by colorful and imaginative illustrations from the print edition of *Gecko* (*https://www.gecko-kinderzeitschrift.de/*). This is a German picture book magazine for young speakers of German as an L1 that features illustrated short stories, poems, and playful riddles. I read these aloud expressively to expose YLLs to authentic, unmodified input in a playful context.

Extended pre-reading activity (Option 1): *My Storybook / Book Creator*

Working alone or in pairs, my YLLs created a short visual story using one of the above digital story online platforms available at *https://www.mystorybook.com/* or *https://bookcreator.com*. Each short story consisted of a cover page that included the title *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* and an illustration or only the illustration without the written title. Then my YLLs had to create at least four additional slides. These slides had to illustrate the four targeted animals and one new animal character not mentioned in the story. In addition, each animal was featured playing a musical instrument. My YLLs had the option of including or leaving out the animal's name and its corresponding German definite article, as well as the musical instrument's name with its corresponding German definite article. If my YLLs opted for the second online platform, they also had the

option of individually or in pairs recording themselves saying the animal's name and its corresponding German definite article, or the musical instrument's name and its corresponding definite article (see *Appendix B* for a teacher sample).

Extended pre-reading activity (Option 2): Adapted *Kamishibai* - animal cut-outs

Kamishibai is a traditional Japanese form of street theatre and storytelling that uses illustrated boards to narrate a story. In this adapted version, working individually or in pairs, YLLs designed, cut out, and coloured their own versions of the four animal protagonists and their pet or favorite animal. Then, they displayed their cut-outs around the class and acted them out.

Extended pre-reading activity (Option 3): Adapted *Kamishibai* – robbers cut-outs

A similar activity to Option 2, this time featuring cut-out robber figures from the folktale and a new character of their choice.

Day 2 (Tuesday)

RWL (reading while listening) picturebook session 1 (without group miming)

We read along while listening to ELi's expressive audio narration. The ELi app provides ten audio tracks for this story – including the narrated story and two original songs – available through the downloadable *Eli LINK app.*

Whilst-reading activity: YLLs-led dance choreography competition

This student-created activity emerged spontaneously during the playback of tracks 3 and 5 from the *Eli LINK* app. It was a spur-of-the-moment-decision taken by my YLLs, and, as such, does not appear to be discussed by others writing on the use of music in the FL classroom mentioned above (Davis, 2017; Degrave, 2019; Dolean, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2024). Notably, it does not align with Dolean's seven methodological steps for using songs in the FL classroom: (1) teacher modeling reading and group translation, (2) group reading, (3) rhythmic group reading, (4) teacher model singing, (5) repetitions (6) singing in small groups, and (7) final repetition (Dolean, 2015, p. 645). As I played the songs, YLLs split into groups and improvised a freestyle dance competition at the front and back of the class. One YLL acted as the judge, using her fingers to award marks and determine the winner.

Post-reading activity: *Suno* AI songwriting

Working alone or in pairs, YLLs used https://suno.com to transform selected passages from *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* into songs in their chosen musical styles. They submitted their Suno-generated links for playback and sharing during this and later lessons.

Day 3 (Wednesday)

Animated picturebook viewing (Session 1)

We watched ELi's animated YouTube version of *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*, adding another layer of meaningful and repeated exposure to comprehensible input.

Reader's theatre with alternative endings

YLLs read out first and then acted out the graded reader's included script. After swapping roles, they read out first and then performed another simplified and engaging script I helped co-write. This second script, also written at CEFR level A1, featured an added character and a whacky or bizarre ending.

Day 4 (Thursday)

RWL (reading while listening) picturebook session 2 (with group miming)

Instead of playing the audio recording provided by ELi's adaptation of *Die Bremerstadtmusikanten*, this time I reread the story expressively but at a slower pace. YLLs mimed sections of the story in small groups, each performing a third of the text.

Task-free music immersion

While my YLLs worked on the poster, book cover, and advertisement design tasks described below, I played a mix of their own Suno AI-created songs and a curated YouTube playlist. (Note: this playlist contains songs, whereas the music playlist available in Appendix A is instrumental only.) The songs selected for my YLLs include:

- DIKKA's children's rap songs (e.g., *Supermama, Superpapa, Glücklich*)

- Catchy songs from recent German children's films (e.g., *Das Leben Ruft, Mit Träumen kann man fliegen*)

Poster, book cover, or advertisement design

YLLs drew and coloured an original poster, book cover, or advertisement for the four musicians' next concert – an imagined event set in the imagined future. Optionally, they put up their work around the class and talked to their classmates about it in English.

Day 5 (Monday)

Recap of *Wortsport* riddles

We revisited the four riddles introduced on Day 1, reinforcing repeated exposure to engaging authentic materials.

Blooket online quiz creation and multiplayer gameplay as formative peer assessment

Blooket (blue-kit) is an online learning platform that gamifies 'closed' and teacher-created quizzes (*https://www.blooket.com/*). Each of its more than twenty edutainment games features embedded multiple-choice questions, along with unique musical loops that give each game a distinct character.

To raise my YLLs' awareness of some collocational patterns, I first selected ten high-frequency German words (see Jones & Tschirner, 2005) that my YLLs had already met during RWL sessions 1 and 2, animated picturebook viewing sessions, Suno AI creation and playback sessions. Using these lexical items as a starting point, I then 'stretched' each word into a collocational chunk by adding one possible collocate. This process resulted in a set of ten collocations, each drawn from *Feste Wortverbindungen des Deutschen: Kollokationenwörterbuch für den Alltag* (Häcki Buhofer et al, 2014), a corpus-based German collocation dictionary. Finally, I used these collocations to create a worksheet featuring each collocation alongside a colourful, cartoon-like illustration.

This approach of recycling comprehensible input reflects the principles of spaced and meaningful repetition outlined by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021), as well as *distributed practice*, which Roediger and Pyc (2012) describe as particularly effective in long-term retention: 'If information [input] is repeated in a distributed fashion or spaced over time, it is learned more slowly but it is retained much longer' (p. 243).

A two-part L2 user-led competition

For the first part of this activity, the roles were reversed as my YLLs themselves became the quiz creators. Working individually, they competed to be the first to create ten multiple-choice questions based on the ten targeted collocational patterns. Optionally, they could also incorporate any new words they had learned from the story.

The fastest quiz writer in this first challenge chose which Blooket multiplayer game (e.g., *Gold Quest, Tower Defense 2, Cafe*) the entire class would play. Each 'closed' question – written in English, German, or both – targeted one of the listed collocations and included a relevant, bizarre, or humorous image of the YLL's choice. Interestingly, most of these questions and answer choices also featured humorous anecdotes about their classmates, further making the quiz memorable.

The second part of the competition involved playing the chosen multiplayer game, now featuring ten questions written by the winning quiz creator. For example, when playing *Cafe*, my YLLs had seven minutes to answer the embedded questions while serving customers and expanding their virtual cafe. Once the time was up, the

top three players were awarded digital *Blooket* tokens, which they could use to buy 'Blooks', collect 'Blooks', or sell them on the platform. The YLL who had been the second fastest to complete the quiz-writing challenge then selected the next multiplayer game for the class.

In terms of feedback, the roles were again reversed. Rather than the teacher providing corrections, my YLLs provided feedback to each other in real time. For example, if a question included a typo or a mistakenly marked correct answer, it was my YLLs who eagerly spotted and called out the error during gameplay – often loudly and with enthusiasm.

Although the activity took the form of a 'closed' multiple choice test, its primary purpose was not for me to formally assess my YLLs' L2 proficiency. Nor was it to determine how much of the input from Day 1 to Day 5 had been processed or transformed into potential intake. After all, as Ellis and Shintani (2014, p. 27) caution, 'the ability to get a multiple choice question right amounts to very little if the [L2] student is unable to use the target feature in actual communication.'

Le dessert

No meal – plant-based or not – feels complete without the experience of *dessert*. Likewise, this paper would be incomplete without a few closing thoughts.

In this article, I have tried to give readers a taste of how I used Suett and Vitelli's (2017) multimodal and graded adaptation of *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* as both a class text and the main stimulus for organizing a five-day learning cycle in a small, multilingual L2 class. I have also outlined how my understanding of Tomlinson's TDA informed my teacher adaptation and guided me in designing, developing, and evaluating mainly meaning-focused and open-ended activities delivered through a range of formats and delivery modes. These included AI-assisted songwriting and multiplayer edutainment games, as well as pencil-and-paper tasks and classroom drama.

With this in mind, this article has offered a practical illustration of innovation in a small, multilingual L2 classroom. As Shintani (2016, p. 30) notes, 'An innovation can start from a small individual success when a teacher is willing to try something new. One way of encouraging innovation is to provide an example of its adoption and implementation.' By sharing the examples above, I hope to contribute to that goal.

The examples shared here are by no means exhaustive or prescriptive; they simply illustrate a few of many possible ideas or directions. For example, when using as a class text another multimodal graded reader – such as *Der Fuchs und die Trauben (The Fox and the Grapes)* an adaptation of an Aesop fable – or any other folk tale or potentially engaging story from your learning and teaching context, teacher supplementary activities

might be designed within a similar five-day framework, or extended into a longer project. One additional idea: YLLs could work in pairs or small groups to co-create *Kamishibai* story cards (paper or digital – see The Japan Society Website in the References section) across the entire learning cycle. Each version could feature an added character, and the project could culminate in a group performance on Day 5.

The graded reader's input is premodified and simplified, and by some definitions, it might not qualify as authentic (for a discussion of authenticity, see, for example, Gilmore, 2007; Jones, 2022; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2021; Ellis & Shintani, 2013). Nevertheless, the selected reading material still meets several key criteria for the 'provision and generation of input in materials for learning' as outlined by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2021, p. 61). Notably, the teacher-adapted activities are 'mainly open-ended' and aim to stimulate both peer interaction and the generation of peer and auto-input (ibid.).

As noted in the beginning of this article, my YLLs did not share the same L1. In this multilingual and culturally diverse context, I believe that it was just as important to acknowledge and value that diversity as it was to foster language development and communicative competence. That belief partly underpins the pedagogical reasoning behind my chosen principled approach. Rather than focusing on short-term mastery of the target language (TL) or on documenting students' individual language development through paper-based summative assessments, one of my main goals was to create spaces that encouraged a sense of belonging, peer interaction, and participation. After all, and according to Hall & Verplaetse (2000, p. 11):

> *Language learning is not a strictly individual, cognitive act, equivalent across learners and situations. Rather, it is presumed to be a fundamentally social enterprise, jointly constructed and intrinsically linked to learners' repeated and regular participation in their classroom activities.*

It is this last aspect – the participatory affordances of AI in the L2 language classroom – that, in my view, points to a new role for digital technology not fully captured by the four metaphors discussed in Stevenson (2008). Looking ahead, my hope is that the upcoming European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) guidelines, *AI Language Guidelines for the Use of AI in Language Education*, will continue to refine and expand a new role that is still very much a work in progress.

Looking back at my paper-based college French workbook and its accompanying blue floppy disks, one thing is clear. I successfully completed many 'closed' and decontextualized grammar and vocabulary fill-in-the-blank exercises on my own in a quiet, mostly empty language lab. But those written exercises alone did not give me the confidence to use my basic Canadian French when our waiter finally came to take our orders.

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Klaus Peter Michelsen *has worked as a private tutor, school teacher, and university lecturer in five countries across four continents. Before completing his graduate studies in education in the UK, he also worked as a tree planter, street performer, and mini-bar attendant. His professional interests centre on the use of creativity and imagination in second language learning, with a focus on fostering learner engagement through different formats and delivery modes, including music, drama, pencil-and-paper, and digital platforms. He is currently based in Bremen, Germany.*

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Appendix A

By scanning the QR Code (Figure 1), the reader can access a curated YouTube playlist featuring five instrumental music tracks (Table 1) I have personally selected for this article. Each piece evokes a unique mood and atmosphere, and the reader is welcome to listen to these instrumental pieces in any order - before, while, or after reading this multimodal article.

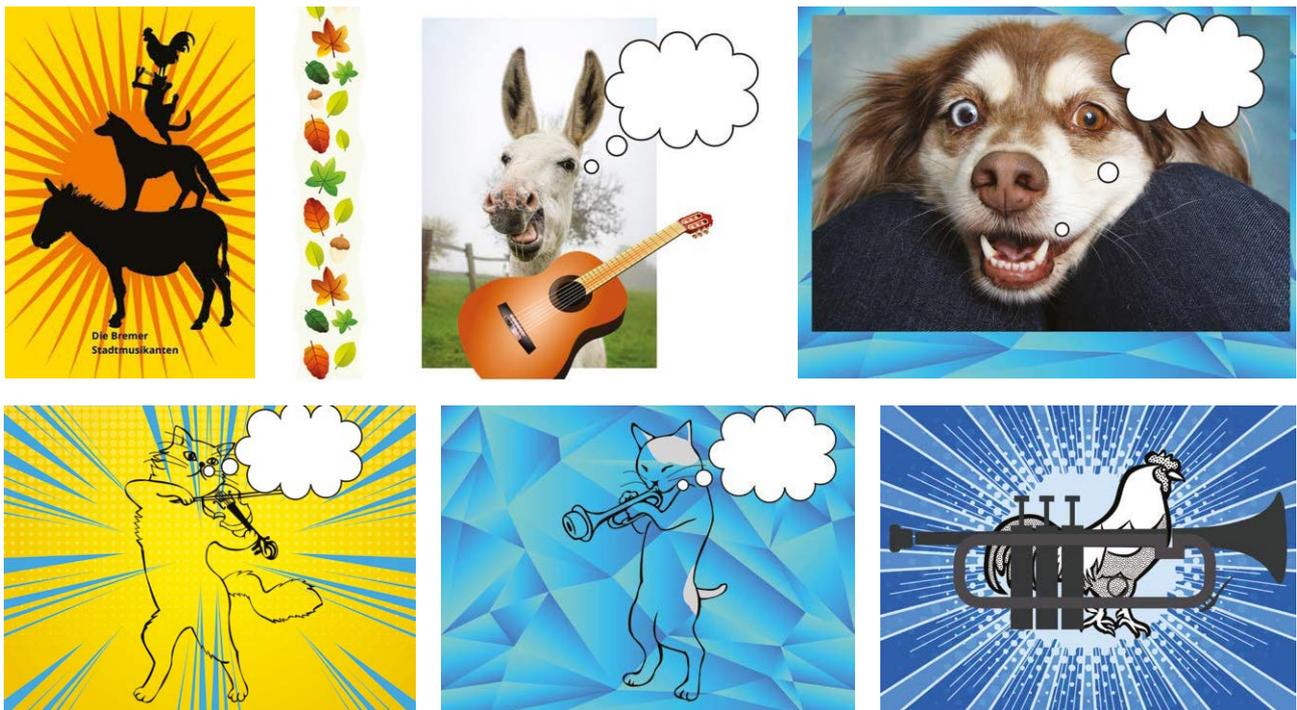| Track Title	Artist(s)	Album
Aerial Boundaries	Michael Hedges	*Aerial Boundaries*
The Moon is a Harsh Mistress	Pat Metheny and Charlie Haden	*Beyond the Missouri Sky*
One Quiet Night	Pat Metheny	*One Quiet Night*
Gregson: 1.1 Prelude	Peter Gregson	*Bach Recomposed*
Gregson: 1.3 Courante	Peter Gregson	*Bach Recomposed*
MoonDial	Pat Metheny	*Here, There and Everywhere*

Table 1: My instrumental music playlist

Figure 1: QR Code to access my instrumental music playlist

Appendix B

Sample visual story generated using *https://www.mystorybook.com/ or https://bookcreator.com.*

www.matsda.org/folio.html