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Language Learning over Distance

Problems of a distance course in German
as a foreign language

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Language Learning over Distance

Distance Learning is not a new concept. Since the 90s changes in technology have influenced the discussions about teaching with new media. The development of the new media raised many expectations. Sometimes a revolution in teaching methods was proclaimed. Some observers saw teachers becoming obsolete in the near future. Learners would decide when and what to learn and would not need the guided classroom teaching anymore. Others suspected the new technology to be applied in order to reduce teaching costs. The expectations were high in some cases and did sometimes forget that the learner would not only be faced with a new learning situation but would have to have matching abilities to handle an new learning environment. Thinking of a language learner one knows how dependent the learner is on paralinguistic features.

After the first enthusiasm, however, doubts were voiced about the "uncritical application" to the learning process. Some scholars were concerned that there might be intended a simple replacement of new technology against the "old" classroom teaching methods. Some doubted the possibility to integrate all language learning components as listening comprehension, reading, speaking and writing by using new media. As we all know today: these components are more or less well integrated in a lot of multimedia language learning material. If they train the intended abilities is another question.

How has the Internet (and its multimedia component, the World Wide Web) changed the methods of learning language? The pioneers started to use the Internet in the early 1990s. Since then we can find many online courses which try to exemplify ways of employing the new medium in the teaching process and embedding it in language learning.

Of course, most of them will be found in university context but there are quite a few school projects between different countries which uses the new media for collaborative classwork over distance.

In 1998, Ruth Vilmi summarized a review of the teaching material at the time and concluded that there were very few distance courses specifically designed for language learning. This has been changed over the last 2 years. Referring to an overview at the homepage of the "Goethe-Institut" which naturally would concentrate on german language courses in the World Wide Web one can find approximately 33 online-offers for German which include some independent online-courses but additional
texts, exercises and online-grammars as well. Notably, some of these courses date back to 1997 and are constantly updated and revised.

Many more online-courses were developed in the English-speaking world, for different subjects and therefore much can be found in the literature about online-courses developed for language learning. In fact, since the WWW has grown to such a huge platform of information and material it is not possible to register all projects which are being run.

The ways in which the Internet has been used in language learning can be characterized as follows:

- reference and research, e.g., discovering vocabulary and collocations typically used in content areas
- listening resources
- finding grammar rules, e.g., using Online Writing Labs (OWLs)
- interactive exercises, activities, or drills for vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading
- analyzing texts, concordancing, and searching for structures, thus deducing rules
- publishing writings with the opportunity for reader feedback
- communicating internationally with e-mail keypals or newsgroups
- communicating in real time, e.g., synchronous conferencing, chatting with IRC, MOOs, video conferencing, or text-based chat rooms
- for online courses, with tutor or teacher participation

Educators are confronted with both the opportunities and the demands of distance education.

Many publications have addressed the changing role of the language teacher when he/she teaches in a multimedia environment. Some have dealt with the changing role of the learner as well. Others have concentrated on technological implications and their influence on learning process. All studies done so far agree that research is still necessary to find out how the new learning environment effects language learning. Still very little is known as to how the language learner in a multimedia environment acts and reacts, how language learners manage and how they are effected by the instruction design. In fact, it is still very difficult to observe these processes either because of institutional regulations or because of technical reasons since it requires a high technological standard both for the educator and for the participants.
For running a distance course the technical options available beside other conditions have to be researched, "using questions among others like these:

- What equipment is available on-site and at the remote sites?
- Will technological support and help be available on-site and at the remote sites prior to, during, and after class?
- Is there any additional cost to the university or the students?"

The question of financing is a very important one. Considering the technological prerequisites the instructor has to ask the question "Can the goals and objectives of the course be met via distance learning?"

Researching distance courses require an enormous amount of preparation which can hardly be done frequently. So still mainly qualifying studies have been carried out and no long time study is known so far.

Another problem is that most of the considered courses are dependent on the willingness of students to take part in such a course, since in most cases the use of the multimedia dimension within a learning context is only an additional part of a regular campus course.

Ref. to other studies carried out the distance situation can be described as follows: as a certain loneliness of both the language teacher and the student, for the student not having direct support and control by the teacher as usually in classroom environment; a very complex environment in which unexperienced learners can easily lose track; the lack of paralinguistic features which again can cause irritation for unexperienced language learners and the necessity of self-organized learning and working which has to be accompanied with self-management competence.

What makes distance learning attractive?
One advantage of computer-mediated learning always mentioned is its time and place independence.

However, this advantage has to correspond with certain learning strategies. It needs new learning strategies of the learner but it needs a rethinking of the instructor too because the distance situation makes the educator more powerless and requires from the learner the ability of self-organized learning and working. It needs familiarity with the use of computers, e-mail and the Internet, which is not that common as one might assume.
The other important advantage of a distance language learning course is to have contact, even if only virtually, with the target culture and with a native speaker which in some cases might be the only chance in using the target language.

So distance language courses can also fill a gap where institutions cannot afford regular language classes at a time. And distance learning is definitely an alternative where only special skills are needed like reading or writing competence.

Naturally, the advantage of email and chat rooms (implemented in a distance course) lies clearly in their providing swift contact between learners and tutors because it gives the learner and the tutor the opportunity to get into contact at any time.

Course Description

The distance course for German, being described, was designed for first year law students who had passed the language entrance test for German with poor results.

Assuming that the students who were going to attend this distance course had already had 3-5 years of German in school before: tasks, texts and exercises were chosen which would meet an intermediate language level. Although it is rather difficult to describe such level since there are too many individual factors which influence the language acquisition process.

Texts are taken from the WWW, provided by InterNationes now part of the Goethe-Institute in Germany. These texts and exercises, didactically prepared, are provided via WWW for teachers of German abroad. The material is constantly updated and provides suggestions for classroom language learning. The tasks and exercises are suggestions and can be shortened or revised. The topics cover a representative range of political, economical, cultural and historical questions with concentration on Germany. All tasks which are connected with group work were excluded because one of the premises of the course had been that each participant should have the opportunity to do preparation individually at home.

Of course collaborative work of the students should always be directed and guided, but in the light of developing the learner’s autonomous learning strategies it seems to be a good chance to use the medium’s own quality, mainly to have access to the course material at any time at any
place. Since it turned out to be a distance course right from the beginning without personal meeting between teacher and students no introduction for collaborative work was given.

The study subject of the target group was also taken into consideration. Although the learners did not have a competence in legal questions at this point topics were chosen which deal with e.g. questions of "youth delinquency", "German court decisions" in Germany concerning religious and cultural questions and educational problems. The texts also give background information about daily life in Germany and provide basic knowledge to enable students to make comparisons between Germany and Sweden. The vocabulary was mainly "everyday" vocabulary and the texts provided annotations for certain words.

The main focus of this course lies on the development of receptive skills like reading and writing. Most work is done by reading texts, answering text questions and discussing the topics in the chatroom.

The whole course is divided into 10 weeks, each week has a topic with text, text exercises and grammar exercises. The grammar does not refer to texts but rather intends to repeat basic knowledge. Grammar exercises follow the scheme of the grammar book which is used in German language courses for the second year here at the University of Linköping and try to cover main problems of Swedish German learners.

The course structure is linear but does not follow an obvious progression because it was difficult within a time frame of 10 meetings between October and April to implement "progressive steps".

Since the students´ level of competence varies, individual language problems were discussed between the teacher and the learner, when written work was corrected. But even after having discussed certain language problems several times the same errors occurred until the end of the course.

The "Chat-Meeting", held every second or third week, was the backbone of the course. Not only the topics were discussed but also problems in learning process and problems with grammatical phenomena. So chat meetings served in a way as conversation class because all participants were in the chat at the same time.

Writing is another skill which was to be developed in this course. Unfortunately, most students tended to turn in rather very short written files.

Writing in general plays a major role because in a distance course the whole "conversation" takes place in written language. In fact, chatting via
the Internet greatly enriches the methodological repertoire because it is linguistically a hybrid of written and oral language. From the linguistic point of view the chat protocols should be interesting for analysis.

The intention by providing corrected chat protocols to discuss certain language problems could not be realized, since almost none of the students did recognize them.

Main goals of the course were to develop text and reading comprehension. Text and reading comprehension served as a basis for writing. There was a development intended from global reading to a more detailed reading. Since one can assume that this target group should be interested in developing their reading skills in the target language. Purposeful reading as part of communicative tasks goes in conjunction with other skills like listening, speaking or writing and can be trained very well via distance.6

Skipping the listening for this course communication in the chat, writing and reading were the skills trained in this distance course. Although writing was also a main focus, it did not develop as expected., because writing exercises were done rather shortly. This contrasts with other experiences:

"Students in Mark Mabrito’s online technical writing class (Purdue University Calumet) did more writing than they would have done in a face-to-face class because all communication in the class was itself done in writing rather than by spoken interchange. As a result, he reports in Teaching Professional Writing via the Internet/Web, that students gained "additional experiences in formulating text so that the entire classroom experience became a type of ‘prewriting’ exercise."7

Methodological Problems

Designing a distance course requires the instructor to focus on different types of interactions: instructor-to-student, student-to-student and student-to-resources. This course was mainly focussing the interactions between instructor-to-student and student-to-resources.

It was difficult "to become knowledgeable about the students and their needs".8 The pretest (a cloze test) at the beginning of the course was not successful because some of the participants had technical problems, some others had difficulties with the test itself. On the other hand students were not used in "searching the web" for educational purposes, to gain
information needed to understand the texts. It was quite obvious that teacher’s guidance was expected.

Concerning the technical part of the course most problems occurred during the chat-meetings due to connection problems between the university servers.

"Inevitably, if something can go wrong, it will, especially with technology. When technical difficulties arise, patience and a sense of humor are vital to success in the virtual classroom." But it becomes even worse when all "conversation" is done in the target language. Since for learners it is always difficult to negotiate problems in the foreign language. Technical problems did occur during chat meetings but were surprisingly managed by the students in most cases.

Another problem was that the obvious "time independence" lead to a "carefree" behavior of the students who did not feel obliged enough to do language work constantly. Lack of face-to-face feedback and immediate support might be reasons.

Not being forced to face a teacher, to meet in classroom does obviously not encourage selfmotivation. The other electronic communication channel (e-mail) was not of remarkable help because some participants failed to check their e-mail regularly, sometimes they missed important messages or ignored demands and requests to send in their homework.

Time limitation and limitation of the medium -one cannot discuss in distance as in detail as in face-to-face situation- have to be considered when defining the goals of a distance course.

So our course showed which requirements have to be met for participating in a distance course:

• Students have to be educated in using technology for such a course.
• A high self managemant competence of the learner is needed.
• Regularly feed-back is necessary.
• A clear structure of the course is needed.
• Support of motivation is important: students have to accept relevance of given tasks.
• Training of cognitive processes is necessary and the acceptance that the learner is an active part in the learning process.

A constant problem is of how to integrate such distance course into the "normal" educational programme. This seems to be the fate of most online-courses as mentioned earlier.
Linguistic Problems

At the beginning of the distance course the level of language knowledge was hardly to assess. Clearly, the most frequent mistakes were anticipated and taken into account by preparing the grammar exercises, because goals and objectives of the course should be established based on the needs of the learners. Starting with a writing exercise gave some impressions about the problems.

The main problems which occurred as far as the written language is concerned in this distance learning course were the following:

- Mistakes in the "case system" and therefore with articles as well.
- Mistakes in the gender system since the Swedish language does not distinguish between 3 genders as German does.
- Problems with the congruence of noun and verb in German which is different to Swedish.
- Problems with the use of tenses, esp. "perfect tense" since it is a very complex structure and leads to verb separation in german subordinate clauses.
- The use of modal verbs caused problems and misunderstandings.
- Word order problems in german subordinate clauses when they differ from Swedish word order.
- Some mistakes which could be caused by interference from English.

These problems cover research studies done by different scholars. For ex. Dentler points out that the German verb position is one of the main error sources for language learners: assuming that the L2 is English for most Swedish German learners one can predict certain difficulties with verb separation and verbfinite last position.\textsuperscript{11}

One vital problem is to discuss these problems over the distance since one cannot be sure if the grammatical terms are known in the target language.

The university diagnostic test esp. the test in theoretical grammar, which the students had to pass, was only of little help to assess the learners' language competence. It would even be hard (if not unmanagable) for German language students of German. This raises the question of appropriateness of this test when it comes to students who are not interested in linguistic questions (naturally) but rather having an approach to language für special purposes. Referring to research literature
about testing one has to ask if this test does really test what the learners already know or what they are supposed to know. Unless one might assume that knowledge about the differences in both linguistic systems German and Swedish would be helpful for language acquisition the problem is that there is no time - and in this distance course hardly any possibility so far - to explain grammar terminology.

Unfortunately one offer, accessible over a reference page of the online course materials, was hardly used: a German online grammar with Swedish explanations and examples, which was created by a Swedish German teacher. One still can see this a missing but necessary working strategy.

If word annotations were helpful for text comprehension has still to be found out. One student wrote, that she did not use the given annotations because the words were already known but that she had to check many other words which were not paraphrased.

Careful analysis of the written works and the chat protocols might help to find typical language difficulties which should be taken into account for creating future learning material. Since writing is an important skill for a future lawyer, more attention will be given the writing exercises as well.

**Advantages of a language learning distance course**

The advantages can be seen as follows:
If properly managed the time and place independence of attending such a course is an advantage.

It just needs computer access on both sides. By just having basic computer skills one can do a lot: searching and finding authentic and brandnew material, which is not subject to conditions of print material. In most cases one has free access to the information. Another advantage is the direct communication to a native speaker.

Since information exchange is not limited to "office hours" or "classroom hours" the instructor has the possibility to take care off each participant individually via e-mail and chatmeeting. The medium provides "one-to-one" interactions between student and tutor as often as wished. Additional advice and aids needed for language learning can be provided very fast via e-mail. The absence of facing the teacher - and maybe the worry about to make a fool of oneself - can be an advantage too because it encourages to express difficulties in a more relaxed atmosphere because
one does not fear to get a reaction, like facial expression, right away. All work done in a distance course can be accessed by any participant whenever wished.

Using the internet gives also the opportunity to strengthen the learner’s ability of selforganizing working processes and gives (theoretically) the learner the chance to set his/her own learning time.

Several questions arise after the first language distance course between Berlin and Linköping has been evaluated:

- At which linguistic level should this distance course start?
- What goal has this language training and is it manageable in the given time?
- Could web-based pattern drill exercises, which give immediate feedback support a faster language acquisition?
- How to motivate the learners even if no countable success in language competence can be seen?
- How can self-learning be developed and supported?
- Is it really a language learning problem or is it a general learning problem, when the distance learner fails?
- Which role plays the first foreign language in the process of third language acquisition?
- Does the chatroom create a learner friendly environment where even "shy learners" start to communicate?
- Can the chatroom function as a "virtual classroom" and what implication does it have for language learning environment?

Maybe the next course will answer some of these questions.
Notes

1 Vilmi, Ruth 1998, (online)
2 http://www.goethe.de/
4 McNames, Patricia 1998, (online)
5 Rösler 2000, (online)
6 Knutson, Elizabeth 1998, (online)
7 Millichap, Nancy 2000, (online)
8 McNames, 1998
9 McNames, 1998
11 Dentler, Sigrid 1997, pp 28

References


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Vilmi, Ruth (1998): Language Learning over Distance. online version: http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/Publication/CALL/toc.html