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ICH-WILL-DEUTSCH-LERNEN.DE:
A LEARNING PORTAL FOR SECOND LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ACQUISITION IN HETEROGENEOUS CLASSES

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Abstract

Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de (I want to learn German) is the name of a new learning portal developed by *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V.* (German Adult Education Association), which was launched in August 2013. The platform provides a digital German course for low- and non-literates that can be used in heterogeneous classes and by independent learners alike. An innovative feature of *ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de* is the combined teaching of oral and written skills that can be adapted to the individual needs of learners. This article argues why there is a need for this kind of material, introduces the concept of the portal and shows actual examples of the material that learners use.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, learning portal, second language acquisition, learning German, adult basic education

1. Introduction

Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de[1] is designed to support the acquisition of German as a second language. It is directed at participants in *Integrationskurse* (integration courses), other language courses and literacy training in the field of adult education as well as to those immigrants who – due to legal, financial or personal reasons – learn independently. The portal focusses on language course levels A1 to B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). Its courses, chapters and learning units are designed around the description model for the CEFR's communicative competences and the curriculum framework for integration courses, as developed by the German National Agency for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*, BAMF 2007).

In developing this literacy learning material, we started with the basic assumption that second language (L2) literacy training is inseparably linked to L2 acquisition. The learning material for non- or semi-literate users of the portal

has therefore been conceptualised as a German language course focusing on oral skills with additional literacy training in L2 German. Another principal aim of *ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de* is to provide a means of helping teachers deal with the pre-existing heterogeneity of German as a second language (GSL) and literacy classes. The non-linear structure of an internet platform supports the idea of combining learning materials at different levels while focusing the class on a common topic.

2. General approach of *Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de*

The curriculum framework for integration courses defines so-called 'fields of communicative action' which summarise the required communicative competences and learning goals for levels A1, A2 and B1 as set out in the CEFR's descriptors. These fields of communicative action include work, education, housing, health, shopping, mobility and other fundamental issues of everyday life. They underscore the contents and learning goals of the 45 chapters spanning the A1, A2 and B1 level language courses that comprise the complete *ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de* programme. These chapters are inter-connected, not only by a grammatical-lexical progression but also by a narrative that is related through 45 episodes of an online, German-for-beginners level soap-opera.

Each of the 45 videos is used to introduce the learner to a field of communicative action as well as to deliver an introduction to new lexical and grammatical structures. The videos are placed at the beginning of each chapter, with the assumption that they can be widely understood by L2 learners. Each video is about three to five minutes long and depicts an episode in the life of a cast of nine protagonists who are struggling - more or less successfully – to find a new job with a secure income, love and a happy family life. They also encounter minor challenges such as passing the *Einbürgerungstest* (the German citizenship exam), correctly understanding the doctor's diagnosis and talking to the teacher about their 15 year old daughter's grades and behaviour.

Figure 1: *Protagonists of the online soap (Michalis, Niki, Elena) on the welcome page of the portal.*

The protagonists in the film series represent different generations, national origins, personal situations, problems and interests. By mastering the challenges of everyday life in Germany (not just communicative ones), they offer a template for the learner, who can compare his or her own experiences with the characters in the film. Despite the happy endings, life is not a "bowl of cherries" in the soap: sometimes communication fails, and it takes strenuous efforts to overcome misunderstandings and difficulties. For example, the protagonists learn that, in certain situations, it clearly helps to have translations of important documents confirming their professional skills. They also manage to overcome several obstacles in securing a bank loan and official approval in order to open a new restaurant. While every episode can be watched and understood independently, several plots develop over the 45 episodes and motivate the learner to continue working with the material.

Because these videos are the starting point for each chapter, they act as the central reference for exercises in which the language is perfected. At level A1,

they provide the introduction for all learners, whether or not they have literacy training needs: in other words, all A1-level learners work from the same videos and dialogue but receive different exercises relating to this material. The exercises are based on the lexical and grammatical structures that are implicitly presented in the dialogic texts of the video episodes.

In the learning units aimed at non- or semi-literate learners, reading and writing skills are provided at different levels – from phoneme-grapheme correspondence to the reading and writing of easy texts. Exercises for different skill levels in literacy training can therefore be assigned to the individual learners, as appropriate.
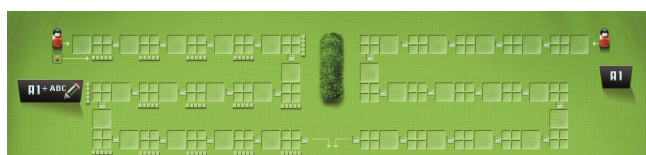

Figure 2*: Parallelism of German courses A1 and A1+ABC (literacy)*

At the same time, the programme aims to stretch literacy learners' oral skills in order to develop their spoken German and secure their progression at an A1 level. The primary aim here is to develop an (oral) functional basic vocabulary and a set of formulaic expressions and routines. This provides not only a foundation for basic communication in the second language but also a basis for focusing on form and applying methods for consciously dealing with grammar at a later stage (Aguado 2002; Edmondson 2006). It also offers an opportunity to work in heterogeneous groups with the same basic material, connecting language acquisition and literacy training.

3. Addressing heterogeneity in GSL classes with literacy training

GSL courses that include literacy training are generally heterogeneous. Nearly all of the literacy courses for GSL learners in Germany are offered as *Alphabetisierungskurse* within the framework of integration courses. *Integrationskurse* are publicly funded GSL courses offered to new immigrants with residential status, leading to the B1 certificate (the prerequisite for applying for German citizenship) and ending after a maximum of 900 hours' tuition – or, in the case of literacy students, 1,200 hours.

Since the establishment of integration courses in 2005, more than 100,000 individuals (over 10 % of all integration course participants) have participated

in *Alphabetisierungskurse*. Between 2005 and 2013, nearly half of them (44,209) passed the *Deutsch-Test für Zuwanderer* (DTZ), and formally completed the course with a B1 certificate. This amounted to 7.1 % of successful integration course students (BAMF 2014).

Literacy courses as part of wider integration courses are designed to combine GSL and literacy training. The content of the literacy course is based on the *Integrationskurse* curriculum framework. It includes not only developing reading and writing skills, linked to the general content, but also establishes a familiarity with learning techniques and a mastery of different media and communication technology (e.g., computers) (BAMF 2015: 84). Taken together, these comprise the programme's integrated learning goals.

Alphabetisierungskurse are not only heterogeneous with regard to the participants' first language, age, gender and other characteristics. Participants also differ with respect to their German oral skills and their reading and writing skills. While some have never been to school, others will have already acquired some literacy skills but are still struggling with the Roman alphabet and are therefore not able to keep pace with learners in a regular integration course. In every respect it is necessary to provide strongly differentiated pathways to meet individual learner needs. At the same time, teachers face the challenge of keeping their student groups together and initiating shared and cooperative learning.

Learning material designed for *Alphabetisierungskurse* not only has to address heterogeneity but also the fact that the course has two main objectives and progressions: learning German and developing literacy skills. The six years since the first release of the *Konzept für einen bundesweiten Alphabetisierungkurs* have seen the publication of key textbooks (Albert, Heyn, Rokitzki, & Teepker 2011; Böttinger 2011; Feldmeier 2011; Hubertus, & Yasaner 2011) and related teaching materials. Nevertheless, the basic problem of all printed textbooks persists: their authors make the assumption that all students start their language and literacy courses with no previous knowledge and follow identical, idealised progressions for acquiring German language and reading/writing skills. Teachers must, therefore, still devote considerable energy to adapting textbooks to students' particular needs and developing their own materials with and for their students.

4. Designing course structures for individualized learning

Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de separates the two elements of the course – GSL and literacy – in a way that enables the learner to gain a differentiated literacy

training with each of the 15 chapters that make up the A1 level German course. In the *A1+ABC* section, the portal provides an A1 German course focusing on the development of oral proficiency plus a large resource of reading and writing exercises. These encompass a total of 250 exercises on five different levels per chapter, and are designed to meet the needs of learners with different skill levels.

Figure 3: *Parallel but separate progressions – above, a detail from the German A1 chapters (1 video with 100 oral exercises in 4 subchapters); below, a total of 250 exercises at 5 levels per chapter for differentiated literacy training connected to the content of the respective chapter*

As described in detail above, each of the fifteen A1 level chapters consists of a single video introducing the chapter's general topic. They provide examples of communication that are rich in expression, vocabulary and structures that form the basis for the chapter's 100 exercises. In order to improve oral proficiency, the exercises focus on listening and understanding, oral repetition of phrases and pattern drill as well as communicative tasks like speaking a message on an answering machine.

This concept is based on the idea that the acquisition of learning in chunks helps students not only to make rapid progress in oral proficiency at A1 level but also to obtain a sense of control and confidence in mastering the L2 (Aguado 2012: 8). Based on these skills, the learners' awareness can be focused on L2 structures to achieve a deeper understanding of phenomena and transferability. The oral A1 course is, moreover, fundamental to German L2 literacy teaching, as literacy can be achieved only on the basis of verbally understandable material (Mempel, Ochs, & Schramm 2013: 50).

Oral proficiency in German is central to the social integration of migrants for nearly all everyday activities and is even more important in the case of students whose reading and writing skills need more time to develop. Non- and semi-literate people require verbal strategies to compensate for their deficiencies and to seek assistance when confronted with written information or tasks they cannot master. The oral A1 course in the portal is designed to

address the verbal challenges of everyday life and therefore includes strategies to request re-phrasing, repetition and other forms of support.

The oral A1 course relies heavily on audio support: functions like recording, replay and repetition are essential. In these exercises every written word, sentence or piece of text is supported by an audio version. By clicking on the loudspeaker icon, users hear the instructions, questions, choices or the texts in which they can identify important information.

The Figure 4-6 are examples for exercises promoting oral understanding and expression (Chapter A1.4 "Buying food") .

Figure 4: *Bingo*
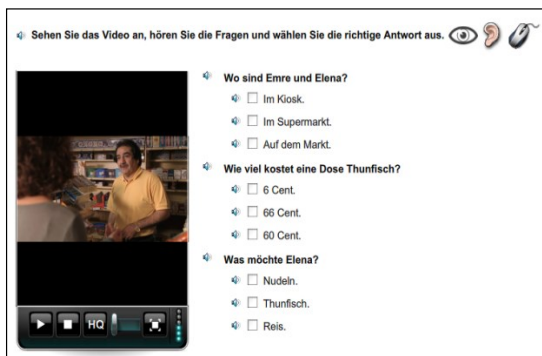(*Instruction:* "Listen to the words and choose the correct pictures.")

Figure 5: *Multiple Choice*

(*Instruction*: "Watch the video, listen to the questions and choose the right answer.")

(Text in Figure 5: - "Where are Emre and Elena?
                          In the Kiosk./In the supermarket./In the farmers' market.
                  -    How much is a can of tuna?
                        6 cents./66 cents./60 cents.
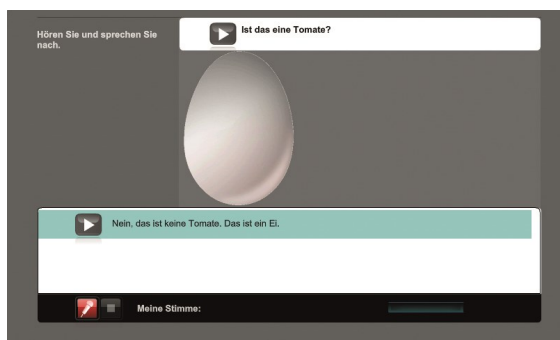
-   What does Elena want?
    Noodles/Tuna/Rice")

Figure 6*:*
Listen and repeat

(Instruction: "Listen and repeat."
Text: "Is this tuna?
                    No, this is not tuna, these is an egg."
Labels beside the 'play' buttons: "My voice" and "compare")

———————————

The oral German course is supported by a parallel literacy training facility, comprising 3,750 exercises for differentiated work in heterogeneous groups. For each of the fifteen A1 chapters 250 exercises at five different levels are provided in order to give the learners enough material to develop their reading and writing skills, linked to the topic and content of the respective chapter. The learning units are designed as follows:

-   Stage 1 covers graphemes and phonemes, numeric characters and vocabulary building on a very restricted basis of five words from the A1 chapter;
-   Stage 2 introduces difficult and specifically "German" phonemes and graphemes, numbers 1 – 100 and a slightly extended vocabulary;
-   Stage 3 provides learners with a wider vocabulary, numbers 1 – 1000 and first grammar exercises;
-   Stages 4 and 5 extend grammatical and lexical work further and provide an introduction to the reading and writing of short and, occasionally, medium-length texts.

The five levels represent the content and learning goals of "Basis-Alpha-Kurs" and "Aufbau-Alpha-Kurs A" as defined in the appendix (*Anhang G*) of the

Konzept für einen bundesweiten Alphabetisierungskurs (BAMF 2015: 164-193). The specific concept for L2 literacy courses differentiates between communicative and linguistic competences such as lexical, grammatical, phonological and orthographical competences. The linguistic competences are strongly linked to the A1 level learning goals in the curriculum framework for integration courses. A1 is the target level for the combined 400 hours of "Basis-Alpha-Kurs" and "Aufbau-Alpha-Kurs A". In this respect, the integration course and literacy course differ only in the time frame set to achieve a certain competence level.

Well-established didactic and linguistic principles form the basis of the grammatical progression set out in the *Konzept für einen bundesweiten Alphabetisierungskurs* and delivered through the portal. These include:

- the order of acquisition (the natural, unchangeable order in which grammatical structures are acquired); (see Clahsen, Meisel, & Pienemann 1983; Diehl, Christen, & Leuenberger 2000; Griesshaber 2003-13; Pienemann 2003);
- the didactic rule of progressing from less to more complex phenomena;
- the pragmatic approach of favouring content with wider applicability over content with a more restricted practical use (the perfect tense – structurally more complex than simple past but much more commonly used in German everyday conversation – is taught long before other forms of past tense); and
- the systematic approach of favouring more frequent over less frequent phenomena (for example, the introduction of the more frequent accusative earlier than the less frequent dative). (See also BAMF 20015: 69ff).

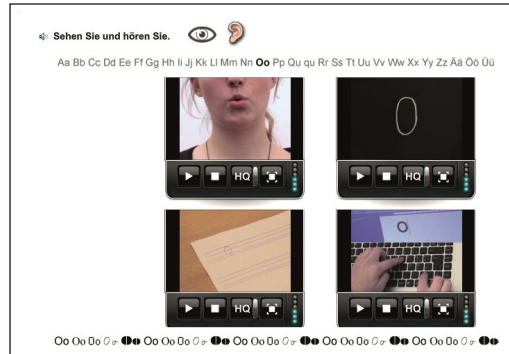The Figures 7-9 are examples for exercises in literacy training on level 1 (Chapter A1.4 "Buying food").

Figure 7:　*Presentation of phonemes and graphemes "o / O" (Instruction: "Look and listen.")*
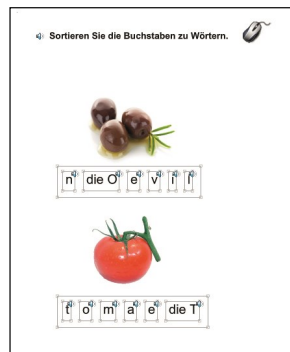

Figure 8:　*Sorting (Instruction: "Put the letters in the right order to make words.")*
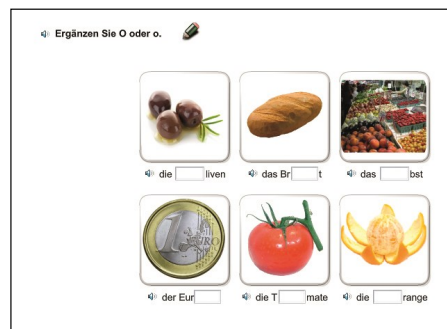

Figure 9:　*Cloze (Instruction: "Complete the words with O or o."*
　　　　　　Text: "The olives/the bread/the Euro/the orange/the tomato/the fruit")

Learners and teachers may freely combine any of the first to fifth level literacy exercises with the oral exercises in the A1 chapter. The overall topic of the chapter provides coherence to the content of individual elements.

Alphabetisierungskurse participants who have a certain measure of literacy and whose introductory lessons do not therefore need to centre on the identification and use of letters and characters may proceed to a higher level. On the other hand, exercises are provided in chapter A1.15 to distinguish graphemes and phonemes for those who need additional support.

The Figures 10-12 are examples for exercises in literacy training on level 5 (Chapter A1.4 "Buying food")

Figure 10: *Cloze, variant drop down*
(Instruction: "Complete the expressions."
Text: "[a bottle of] milk / [a can of] peas/[a bar of] – [a can of] chocolate/ [ ] crisps")

Figure 11: *Cloze variant drag and drop, with corrections*
(Instruction: "Niki doesn't like fruit or vegetables. What is she saying? Listen and fill in the blanks."
*Text: "I don't like fruit or vegetables" (Lit.) "I [like] no fruit and [no] vegetables." I don't want any bananas or carrots." (Lit.) "I want [no] banana and also no [carrots]." "Vegetables aren't food." (Lit.) "Vegetables [are] no food." "Lettuce and carrots [*is] fine for rabbits but [not] for me.").*
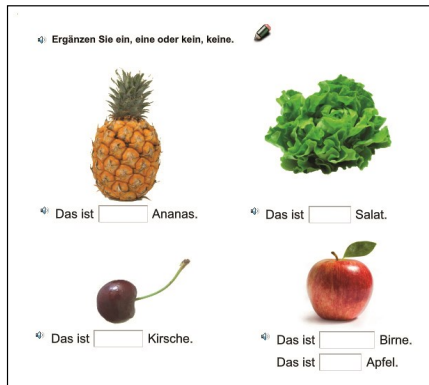
Figure 12: *Cloze, variant "type in"*

(Instruction: "Complete ein, eine or kein, keine".
Text:
"This is [a] pineapple./
This is [a] lettuce./
This is [a] cherry./
This is [not a] pear. This is [an] apple.")

Despite these differentiated levels, the class's integrity will be maintained by the students' working on the same topic and progressing together in completing the A1 chapters. The topics and the videos create a framework for shared, mutually-supportive learning in the classroom, prompting questions and discussions among students, providing a spur for communicative activities and role-play and opportunities for projects and sharing personal experiences. During individual activity periods, the class is split up and each student can tackle any of the 350 exercises in each chapter that fits his/her personal needs.

This differentiation is not limited to different sets of exercises but also extends to an individual learner's pace in completing the exercises. Working individually at the computer, the learner determines his/her own tempo and also decides by him/herself whether or not to repeat a recording, exercise or the whole learning unit. Automated feedback in the great majority of the exercises not only helps to control the outcomes but also speeds up learning processes as it immediately confirms or rejects the learner's assumptions. The rapid correction of errors supports learning and encourages learner autonomy. It also helps to maintain the momentum of learning outside the classroom and after the course has ended.

Automated feedback certainly has its limitations and is not a panacea. For all those exercises and open tasks where differentiated feedback is needed, a tutor can support the learner (see, e.g., Figure 13). Teachers assuming the role of a tutor control the learning process and results, assign exercises to individual learners or whole classes, and send corrections and feedback on written texts and recordings.
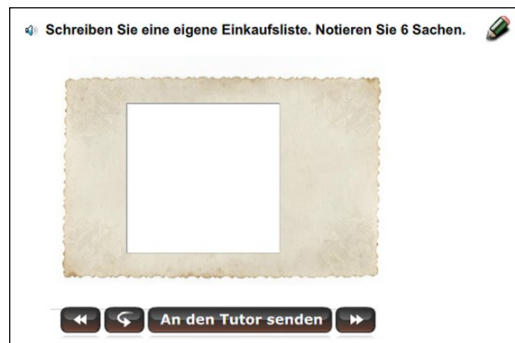
Figure 13: *Example of a level 3 literacy training exercise on (chapter A1.4 "Buying food"), open Free text input exercise that can be sent to the tutor (Instruction: "Write out your own shopping list. Make a note of 6 things." Button below: "Send to the tutor")*

Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de is also freely accessible for independent learners. In such cases, learning support is provided by a number of tutors at Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband, where teachers assist with correcting and giving feedback on 'open' productive skills exercises for which automated feedback is not practicable.

5. Conclusion

Ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de is designed as a tool for heterogeneous GSL classes that may include non- or semi-literate learners who, in addition to learning the German language, need to improve their reading and writing skills. Unlike printed textbooks, the portal's non-linear structure and the considerable amount of material it contains create a platform where highly individualized learning can be successfully delivered: this fully acknowledges the varying needs and pace of heterogeneous classes, without compromising the benefits arising from their team spirit.

In further developing the platform the improvement of differentiated feedback is highly desirable. This might include specially-designed exercises and feedback to raise language awareness by comparing and contrasting German with the learner's native or third language. Currently, the language selection on the welcome page gives access to translated elements of the portal: a video tutorial on basic functions and navigation, the registration form and

various 'help' documents, terms of use and a data privacy statement, currently available in a total of sixteen languages. By using the language selection facility as the basis for differentiated feedback, a learner could gain suitable input for developing his/her ability to understand and compare features of his/her language(s) with the German structures and examples. It could also provide better opportunities for teachers to appreciate the learner's language(s) as an important basis and resource for learning.

Because learning needs can be addressed individually and learning processes are being progressed through the platform, a positive effect on the general motivation of learners is very likely. Recent student feedback indicates that participants in literacy courses need special assistance in gaining familiarity with computer-assisted learning and mastering an internet-based portal. But it is also evident from interviews that learners are highly motivated to access digital learning programmes and that they appreciate the content – especially the videos, related exercises and learning games – of *ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de* (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband 2013).

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the portal is to be seen in the likely advancement of learner autonomy that is supported by a free and publicly-accessible learning programme. This in no way supersedes traditional, face-to-face courses, but rather, it opens up new opportunities for effective and continuous learning inside and beyond the classroom.

Note

1 The project *ich-will-deutsch-lernen.de* is promoted and sponsored by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung BMBF), Förderkennzeichen W124803.

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