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"EINSTIEG DEUTSCH" - A GERMAN LANGUAGE LEARNING APP FOR REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT: "Einstieg Deutsch" is a German language learning app for refugees developed by the German Adult Education Association (DVV) and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

The app aims to establish a basic ability to communicate in German as a second language (L2) through chunk learning. Exercises focus on listening, understanding, and reproducing oral phrases in order to improve oral proficiency at level A1 (CEFR). Protagonists are people from Eritrea, Syria, and Afghanistan. The chapters deal with issues related to everyday life and help refugees communicate in situations where usually no translation is available; e.g., talking to a doctor, shelter staff, or security personnel. The "Einstieg Deutsch" app is completely translated into ten languages (Arabic, Dari, English, Farsi, French, Kurmanci, Pashto, Tigrinya, Turkish and Urdu). It is free of charge and available for iOS and Android in the App Store and the Google Play Store.

KEYWORDS: digital media, mobile learning, e-learning, app, chunk learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, more than a million refugees are estimated to have arrived in Germany, and 441,899 people submitted a first application for asylum – the numbers of people arriving and applying for asylum in Germany, a country in the middle of Europe and surrounded by "safe countries", are much higher than in previous years. Most of these refugees come from Syria and from other countries in the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan), the Balkans, and the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea). (BAMF, 2015: 2; Eurostat, 2015: web).

Even though the conflicts that force the people in these countries to flee are not new, Germany was unprepared to handle the high influx of people seeking protection and was

confronted with what was called and perceived as a "refugee crisis". All of the departments in the German federal government were called on to help solve the situation. Within this context, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) commissioned the German Adult Education Association (DVV) to develop a German language learning app for refugees to give new arrivals to Germany a basic tool for everyday communication in the language of their new environment.

The app aims to help refugees communicate in German and give them their first opportunity to learn simple phrases, expressions, and basic vocabulary.

The app is not meant to replace a language course, but language courses for refugees are a rare commodity these days. On the one hand, the infrastructure of language schools offering German as a second language was ill-equipped to handle the rapid rise in demand for German courses. The numbers of courses offered falls far short of actual demand due to a shortage of teachers and lack of space, but also as a result of inadequate public funding. On the other hand, the integration courses financed by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) are only open to asylum-seekers who the BAMF rates as having "good prospects of being granted permission to stay in Germany". In autumn 2015, this applied to refugees from the countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Eritrea. Somalia has also been part of this group of countries since summer 2016. Asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or other crisis-torn countries in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and Africa have no way to attend state-funded language courses and receive so little financial support that it would be impossible for them to pay for classes on their own.

The German Adult Education Association takes the view that all immigrants and refugees, without exception, should have access to German courses and language training. Digital learning courses for German as a second language, however, is one way to reach people who would otherwise be excluded from courses and learning opportunities due to insufficient mobility, their immigration status, financial restrictions, etc. They are also accessible to people who are waiting for a course and already want to start learning or who want to continue learning after their course has ended (see also Sokolowsky 2015).

2. DIDACTIC CONCEPT

The "Einstieg Deutsch" app is explicitly geared toward refugees with different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds who have just arrived in Germany and have no previous knowledge of German. It aims to give learners a quick start in the German language. It is designed both as a kind of basic phrase book and as a starting point for learning German as a second language. It assumes a basic and immediate need for communicative action and aims to help learners achieve spoken proficiency in German quickly.

A total of 15 lessons dealing with specific topics are available to students. These lessons do not progress chronologically, which means that learners can take lessons based on interest or an immediate communication need. Lessons don't have to be taken in any particular order, and they can be skipped or left out altogether. The topics focus on the everyday lives of refugees and their language needs. The content differs from a typical A1 course for immigrants to Germany, which focusses on the everyday life questions of people who enter Germany with residental status and work permit.

Therefore, in addition to topics such as *About me*, *Health* or *Food*, the app also includes topics like *In the camp* (Communication with shelter staff and Security personnel) or *Reporting an emergency*[1].

Figure 1: Overview Chapters.

The programme follows an approach dedicated to learning principles that focus on developing competence and the capacity for action and interaction, and prioritises the principle of chunk learning. This means that the app works specifically with complex sequences, which are memorised as entire units to give learners – in this case refugees – the capability to speak, interact, and act as quickly as possible.

The goal is also to achieve rapid success in communicative action. Groups of words – known as chunks – are memorised as a fixed collocation or routine and produced in ways that are appropriate to the situation, linguistically correct, and with a natural flow. This helps learners, for example, to successfully initiate or hold a conversation in which the other person, who is more competent in the second language, is then more willing

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1. It is a sad reality that there were 1,000 attacks on refugees in Germany in 2015, including 94 arson attacks on shelters. The situation in the "Reporting an emergency" lesson, therefore, deals with how to report a fire. The titles of all 15 topics in detail are: Greeting, About me, Health, Shopping, Appointments, Authorities, In the camp, Reporting an emergency, Clothes, Out and about, Questions and requests, Children and learning, Food, Housing, Free time.

to provide support in the dialogue; e.g., when formulating a request or transmitting information.[2] Successful communicative action in turn is a motivation to continue learning a language, because the learner realises that he can reach goals through language. With this in mind, the app's focus on success in interaction plays a central role.

Chunk learning relies on the acquisition of patterns and sequences or formulations that are commonly used and conventionalised and can, therefore, be expected in certain situations. Chunks can vary in size and occur both as entire, virtually rigid, unchangeable phrases (e.g., "Wie geht es Ihnen?" (How are you?) as a way to ask after someone's state of health or a standard greeting) as well as sentence patterns with slots for variables (e.g.,"Ich hätte gern.." (I would like ...) as a pattern of an order or a request for a product or service). They are not formed anew every time they are used but processed as a single element as perception and memory units. Chunks are formed by linking smaller units to one another and then memorising them - as grammatically correct and phonologically coherent phrases. The speakers are not aware that these sequences contain grammatical information - some of it highly complex - such as case, inversion, or subjunctive (e.g. dative pronoun in "Wie geht es Ihnen?", subjunctive verb form in "Ich hätte gern...").

The "Einstieg Deutsch" app does not teach grammar explicitly. Grammatically correct sequences, however, are acquired with the chunks. These sequences support the development of grammar acquisition and can be used as a basis for cognitive processes at a later stage. "Routines lead to grammar" doesn't just apply to a child's first language acquisition, but also to second language acquisition, regardless of whether the language structures are ultimately learned unconsciously or are explicitly identified, analysed, and compared with grammatical features of the first language after routines and chunks are introduced (Edmonson 2006: 211).

Chunks are fixed sequences with a clear link to a situation. They help the learner act "with fluency" with language that is appropriate to the situation, idiomatically correct, and without hesitation. In addition to conversation routines such as "Guten Tag!" (Hello) or "Das tut mir leid." (I'm sorry to hear that), the lessons include noun-verb compounds such as "eine Auskunft geben" (to give information), idiomatic phrases such as "Gern geschehen!" (Don't mention it) or "Kein Problem!" (No problem) and sentence patterns like "Wo finde ich...?" (Where can I find...?).

Everyday language - whether spoken or written - is full of these kinds of "fixed components": the portion of chunks is estimated to be up to 70 percent among competent speakers of a language (Wray & Perkins 2000: 1-2). As a result, some researchers consider chunking to be a prerequisite to fluency. "The high speed at which competent speakers usually speak and understand could not be explained if a significant part of linguistic processing were not based on automatisms"[3] (Aguado 2016: 31; see also Pawley & Syder 1983).

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2. With reference to Wildner-Bassett, Edmondson emphasises the communicative, strategic use of routines in second language acquisition with five specific functions: facilitating initial contact, developing conversational skills, increasing behavioural confidence, demonstrating social affiliation, and saving time (Edmondson 2006: 210). Wray & Perkins (2000) assign specific purposes to two overarching functions, namely social interaction and the speed at which language is processed (pp.14-16).

3. Translation of the original German: "Die hohe Geschwindigkeit, mit der kompetente Sprecherinnen und Sprecher normalerweise sprechen und verstehen, wäre nicht erklärbar, wenn nicht ein erheblicher Anteil des Verarbeitungsprozesses auf Automatismen beruhen würde."
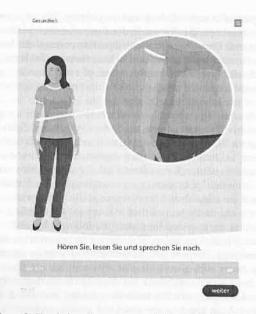
If chunks are part of competent language proficiency, learners must be sensitised to them; i.e., they must specifically watch for them and incorporate them into their repertoire formulations. Chunks are thus an important prerequisite for participation in target cultural practices, which is one reason to have them available early in the lessons. Mastering these chunks gives the learner a sense of confidence and independence in dealing with the target language, which positively underpins any further communication in the language and any other language learning.

The "Einstieg Deutsch" app presents chunks in the context of a topic that is introduced in a slide show. The protagonists are Samira Aziz (from Syria), Yonas Mehari (from Eritrea), and the Fani family (from Afghanistan), who communicate successfully in certain situations; i.e., tell the doctor they have a sore throat and ask the doctor to write down his recommendation for medicine, ask for winter shoes for their children's growing feet, or notify the fire brigade in an emergency. In the scenario, the learner is first asked to watch the slide show with German audio texts (with subtitles available in ten languages that can easily be switched to German) for meaning. Later, individual phrases and sequences are provided for repetition, followed by entire roles.

Exercises to teach basic vocabulary also start with presentation and semantisation (conveying the meaning). The new lexical elements can then be inserted and tried out in the sentence patterns with a variable slot. For example, in the slide show about "Health", Samira has a sore throat, which she describes to the doctor. But, with the help of the picture-based learning units for vocabulary related to health & body, the pattern "I have *a sore throat.*" can apply to any acute and chronic ailment: "I have high blood pressure.", "I have a fever."

Figure 2: Detail Slide Show Chapter *Health*

Hören Sie, lesen Sie und sprechen Sie nach.

weiter

Figure 3: Vocabulary Presentation and Semantization Exercise

Gesundheit

Hören Sie, lesen Sie und sprechen Sie die Rolle. (1/1)

Ich habe Halsschmerzen. Ich fühle mich nicht gut.

weiter

Figure 4: Exercise with Audio Recording Function (Chapter *Health*)

3. EXERCISE TYPES AND FUNCTIONALITIES

Central to memorising the chunks is not only listening to the German texts but also verbally repeating exactly these patterns and routines. The app has many exercises in which single words, entire formulations, and phrases are repeated and recorded using the audio recording function and can then be compared to the original by the learner. Sequences can be reinforced using a smartphone before they are tried out in everyday life. It is up to the learner to assess the appropriateness of what he has produced - this is something that is not supported by this software. Learners are certainly capable of performing this task, and it encourages learner autonomy, even if individual phonetic variations are not recognised: Not even the best software is capable of this. On the contrary, a software-based evaluation of words or expressions spoken by the learner as "objectively correct" would be detrimental. Instructing the learner to record and evaluate his own production appears to be a viable way to learn a language without professional support.

Other types of exercises in the app are: *multiple choice* (with questions about the slide show, shown in Figure 5), *matching* (pictures and terms or singular and plural forms are matched to one other, shown in Figure 6), and *hotspots* (two variants: audio is triggered by touching elements on a picture, or the learner is prompted to identify and touch a certain part of a picture after the audio is played).

In addition, games support the learning activities in the app. To memorise and repeat the vocabulary, fun exercises are offered for every topic in which learners, for example, memorise an increasing number of terms in a certain order or identify terms (under time pressure) in a jumble of letters.

The app also has a vocabulary collection and a phrase book that can be used within or across topics. These lists of expressions and words are complemented by a vocabulary trainer. With the help of the vocabulary trainer, the learner repeats phrases and individual words and then saves them as "know" and "unknow". Depending on how they are saved, the vocabulary is provided for repetition earlier or later.

Was ist richtig? Wählen Sie aus.

A   Jonas begrüßt seinen Bruder.

B   Samira verabschiedet sich von ihrer Schwester.

Figure 5: Multiple Choice Exercise

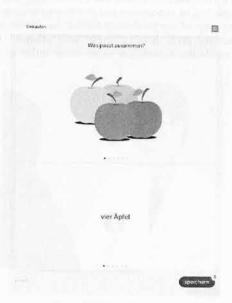Figure 5: Multiple Choice Exercise

Was passt zusammen?

vier Äpfel

Figure 6: Matching Exercise

4. A METHOD FOR LESLLA LEARNERS?!

The "Einstieg Deutsch" app is explicitly geared toward learners with no previous knowledge of German who want a basic tool for using the language and learning basic expressions with the program. Based on the chunks offered, learners can carry out important, relevant, and useful communicative acts and thus be able to communicate quickly about the most important everyday issues.

The target group of refugees and their communication needs determined which topics were selected, how they were structured, and which day-to-day situations were used as examples. Paramount in enabling learners to find their bearings in their immediate environment is the development of speaking and listening skills in the context of an action-based approach to learning.

Action-based means that learners perform tasks that are linked to their everyday lives. These tasks prepare them to communicate outside of the classroom. Chunk learning is the ideal starting point, because it integrates training of vocabulary, structures, and pronunciation or prosody. Moreover, these sequences inherently contain extensive culture-specific knowledge that is learned "in passing" (Who says what, when, to whom, and how?).

The use of chunks means that practically oriented, immediately applicable expressions are taught instead of abstract knowledge. For many immigrants, the acquisition of language skills for coping with everyday situations in the second language often occurs unconsciously and implicitly through pure "language immersion". Many refugees, however, (also due to mass accommodation in old army barracks, centrally distributed food / everyday necessities, etc.) initially have limited social contact with speakers of German, the local context, and and the German language. They thereby lack important opportunities to hear the linguistic expressions in the frequency required to bring about successful communication, let alone to quickly use these expressions correctly and appropriate to the situation.

The acquisition of chunks - also with an app to help understand and practise language in everyday situations – can, therefore, facilitate initial contact with people in the target society, ensure that everyday communication is successful, and foster mutual understanding. The use of chunks encourages participation in society (Aguado 2002, 2016: 33). At the same time, successful first contact with speakers of the target language and mainstream society is a prerequisite for continued learning.

Although the focus of the "Einstieg Deutsch" app is the target group of refugees and beginners with no previous knowledge of the language, the method of chunk learning used in the app is generally suitable for everyone, for non-refugees and even advanced learners, especially when ability to speak in the second language is the focus. To develop long-term, good language skills, it is necessary for the learner to internalise his linguistic skills and form a system of rules on this basis. This is done *not* by learning declarative rules, but through "good" input, authentic tasks, and intensive learner activation at a high rate of repetition and with many automated applications.

The method does not cut across the structured and explicit teaching of the rules and structures of a language. At the same time, traditional grammar teaching is only useful if learners want it (because this is what they are used to as a result of their learning tradition or language learning biography) and have a strong cognitive approach to language learning and problem-solving strategies. Knowledge of explicit rules is not necessary to develop fluent language skills.

The method of chunk learning is particularly well-suited and intuitive for LESLLA learners who have often already learned one or more languages in part with no supervision and without explicit knowledge of grammar through "language immersion". When learning with chunks, vocabulary and grammar are not artificially separated as they often are in supervised acquisition. If learners can be successfully sensitised to chunks - also using digital learning media - and their awareness of these linguistic sequences sharpened and thus their level of attentiveness increased, they are empowered to continue learning independently without prepared input.

Chunk learning is an excellent way for learners to not only make rapid progress in oral proficiency at the 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. Oral proficiency in a given L2 is, moreover, fundamental to any L2 literacy teaching, as literacy can be achieved only on the basis of verbally understandable material (Mempel, Ochs, & Schramm 2013: 50).

Oral proficiency is central to the social integration of migrants and refugees 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.

On the basis of these considerations, it is highly desirable to advance the approach and material on a broader scale, including other target groups and focusing on the interaction of oral proficiency training through chunk learning and literacy training.

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