

TEACHING LANGUAGES AND THE INTERNET

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1. Introduction: Teaching, learning and the World Wide Web

What opportunities does the World Wide Web offer for teachers and learners? It is possible to claim that vast areas of the (disregarding for one moment the ever increasing amount of entertainment and commercial web pages) Internet are devoted to nothing but learning and teaching. After its military beginnings the idea to use computer and telephone lines to build up a net in order to exchange ideas, opinions and information on a world wide basis was first and foremost promoted by universities and political groupings in the name of science and free information flow. The guiding principles of the World Wide Web were its openness and its interactivity. It was a medium that not only encouraged the consumption of information, but welcomed the contributions of groups and people from all over the world. Today the Internet has been discovered by big business and the vast majority of all pages are commercially orientated, but with its multitude of opportunities (e-mail, data research, discussion groups, distance courses, hyper-textbooks, link lists etc.) the net offers a wide range of possibilities for teachers and learners alike.

The basic qualities of the new medium, namely interactivity using a wide range of different media types (hypertexts, audio-texts, photography and video) allows for new forms of teaching and learning. Like in language programmes for television you have the spoken word supported by pictures and all kind of sounds. But unlike television the usage of the Internet provides a multitude of background links that can be immediately used by the learners to back up their knowledge and understanding. Looking at the spectacular growth of the new medium in the past three years, however, criticism of and scepticism towards the WWW have also been grown. How - this being the most important and most urgent question - is it possible to handle the enormous amount of information provided by the net without getting lost in its ever growing piles of useless information garbage?

1.1. Learner's paradise or information overkill?

The information industry promises fast, easy and comfortable learning using the new media types Internet and multimedia. But will learners be able to cope with all new possibilities and be able to really think about what they are doing? Or will they just consume more and more information without having the competence to categorise and organise their

learning? The ever increasing amount of information and the sheer endless number of links to web pages could - according to a number of critics - simply lead to an information overkill and therefore to insecurity and confusion. The offers are practically unlimited, but what information do learners really need?

Other media critics have branded the excessive use of the Internet as anti-social and compared its effects to watching TV excessively. Indeed most areas of the Internet have become just like television or radio a medium for entertainment and commercial enterprise. Taking this criticism seriously one should look at the Internet and its vast information supply under a couple of new aspects.

Firstly it should be made clear that today the Internet is first and foremost a commercial medium directed towards entertainment and economic profit and like any other mass medium it is increasingly dominated by big business. It is therefore only logical to distinguish between its recreational, its commercial, its informational and its educational use.

The first type of usage should not concern us here. For the moment it is sufficient to state that there are large and growing sections of the net which offer free of charge high quality services to teachers and learners alike and that the commercial and scientific parts of the net offer an enormous amount of information from the world of business and science hardly available anywhere else. But although the World Wide Web does offer these uncountable tutorial systems, textbooks, encyclopedias and exercises, it should be regarded as basically a cognitive tool. A tool that needs quite a lot of competence and experience to handle it efficiently with positive results. The possibility of individual, self-organised learning depends on the abilities of the users to manage an enormous amount of information effectively and economically and can therefore only be successfully realised in a social and educational context. The learners should not be left alone but guided and encouraged to share their experiences with their fellow students and teachers. Most importantly users of the Internet for educational purposes should ask themselves beforehand what information do I need for what purposes? And secondly where do I get these information?

1.2. A supplier of vast and diverse information

The information supply in the World Wide Web differs fundamentally from all other media with regard to quantity, content and the structure of the offered information. The user can independently of time and space search for all kinds of information from a sheer endless list of suppliers. World-wide bibliographical research has for instance become possible for 24 hours a day regardless of where the researcher happens to be or what he or she is looking for.

Information gathering is not only faster with the Internet, but a growing number of information is exclusively available in the World Wide Web (e.g. on-line magazines, discussion groups). A special quality is the immediacy that is conveyed by the new medium. Learners do not research about a certain topic but are live on-line when they surf the Internet. The user can gather information about how the available knowledge is produced and presented, conveying vividness, actuality and immediacy. All information is permanently available and constantly updated. The Internet therefore is an interactive information system. The availability of such a powerful source of knowledge makes it possible to redefine and enlarge the role of teachers and learners alike.

The teacher no longer only has to convey his or her individual knowledge, but can take over the role of a guide and presenter. Part of his new role now consists in the guidance and direction of the learners who independently look for questions and answers. Lessons are no longer fact-centred, but are designed to further cognitive abilities and fine-tune and

promote strategies for self-organised learning and work. The Internet can be used as a means for the preparation and the post evaluation of lessons by learners as well as by teachers. Students and teachers can be encouraged to use the Internet for the following purposes:

- fast and comfortable obtaining of texts, data, diagrams, sound and pictures
- dialogue with fellow learners and colleagues
- looking for extra material
- learners can easily obtain and work through teaching material prepared by their teachers which has been put on the net

1.3. Critical understanding of information

Like any other information, information obtained from the WWW should not only be consumed, but reflected upon and critically analysed. Some qualities of the Internet especially support this critical usage of the medium. Because of its open structure and the possibility for the users to immediately correspond to the content of the pages, the Internet not represents knowledge but at the same time criticised and analysed from numerous points of views. The recipients of information have the opportunity to produce information and they can this to a degree impossible in any other media. At the same it should be kept in mind that the methods of the provision of knowledge are not always basically transparent, making a critical reception more difficult. Like in any media the basic questions are: Where does the information come from? Who is the author? How topical and relevant is the information he or she provides? What were the criteria of its compilation? What is the background of the author?

Information provided by the World Wide Web is largely virulent and uncontrolled. Indeed one of the basic features is that the content of pages is as a rule not censored. A quality which on the one hand secures freedom of speech and expression but on the other hand allows for pages with a rather ethically questionable and sometimes even criminal content. The merits of the new medium should however not be judged by these nuisances but by its positive qualities. Learners and students who use the internet no longer say: "I could ask," but "I will ask and I can do it immediately." Supporting self-organised learning means that the teacher no longer has to say: "You have to read the following chapters until next time," but with the aid of the Internet learners are stimulated to self activity. The task could be to find out what sources of information can be found for a certain topic? How are these sources to be evaluated? What question can be answered, which question are left open by these sources? Moreover the authors can be contacted and their reaction be discussed. This way new learning targets can be developed for teachers and learners alike: the most important challenge being the problems of individual and social knowledge management.

The World Wide Web can be used as a medium which furthers individual achievement and simultaneously stimulates communication. Some critics (e.g. Neil Postman) have pleaded for a "better life with less information", but keeping in mind what has been said about the Internet the crucial point is not the quantity of good or bad information, but how the amount of available information is managed and its content critically analysed. Responsible teacher will try to boost their learners' abilities to critically manage knowledge by furthering their development of selection and priority criteria and clearly limiting the scope of the exercises.

1.4. Active contribution and criticism

Whereas the production of a textbook cannot be followed up by its readers the user of the Internet can not only follow up the development and improvement of a page but can also contribute to its content and quality. Users of the Internet can be distinguished between invisible onlookers, peripheral participants, central participants (who contribute their own knowledge and ideas in the form of texts, pictures and sounds) and partners in discussion. This contributes to reduce fears and inhibitions with regard to the production and presentation of one's own knowledge. The possible advantages are that passive reception and recapitulation are completed by self activities in the forms of: writing, designing, questioning and discussing. The learners do not have to supply themselves with large amounts of knowledge but learn "just in time" in order to cope with specific exercise. The main target is to develop the individual's ability to structure knowledge.

A lot of teaching media have disadvantages concerning the motivation of the learners. The artificial and closed learning worlds have been developed in order to support the learning process. The gratification with some pictures or trendy language is however for young adult learners no longer very satisfactory. Much better is the active development and design of products like exhibitions, magazines, texts and sounds that can all be published on the Internet and this way reach a vast number of prospective consumers and critics. Self activity of learners produces want for knowledge, creates desires for further learning and stimulates interdisciplinary studies.

To sum it up: the Internet is no genuine medium of instruction like a text-book, but a cognitive tool and aid to motivate learners to cognitive activities and to facilitate and support them. The teacher should convey the necessary strategies for knowledge management and information regulation which are necessary for self-centred and active learning.

2. A Practical Example: Teaching business German with the help of the Internet

The use of the World Wide Web in language teaching may for the majority of teachers still rather be a thing of the future than something that can effectively be done in lessons. Apart from a lack of access to this medium this might also be due to certain misconceptions viewing the Internet as a medium that needs a lot of special skills and technical expertise. Simultaneously the new medium does not offer itself for direct usage in the classroom because of the numerous and expensive equipment that is needed. The example of vocationally orientated language teaching however shows that the exhaustive didactic qualities of this new information infrastructure can already be effectively used. In the teaching of Business German the need for authenticity and actuality (and specialisation) is far greater than in general language teaching. If the teacher does not know the present tendencies and eventualities of the economy - let's say for example up to date exchange or interests rates - he or she will certainly not be taken seriously by their learners.

The growth of the Internet demands new vocational language skills like the writing of e-mails in the foreign language to prospective new clients or the ability to do research in the German (or any other foreign language) part of the net. Dealing with the Internet furthers self-education and media competence of the learners and at the same time it offers teachers vast numbers of opportunities for finding authentic and up to date classroom material. Furthermore teachers can use the net to self-educate themselves in the sphere of teaching business language. This is especially necessary because teaching a foreign business language not only demands the ability to teach and explain the foreign language but also economic expertise, especially when the learners know more about economics than the teacher does.

Although we find quite a number of different teaching and learning constellations in this field of studies it can be claimed that the majority of all teachers have undergone training for teaching general German and self educated themselves with regard to economic and business studies. The opposite case of economists teaching a foreign language or real double qualifications occur relatively seldom. The following overview therefore concentrates on World Wide Web-resources for teachers which can however be interesting for learners at the same time. Emphasis is put on the Internet as

- a constantly available source of information for teachers as well as students
- a means to further self learning and student autonomy
- a means of educating oneself about the latest development in language teaching as well as in teaching business language
- the usage of the Internet as treasure trove for authentic material
- as means of information and communication in the classroom itself

Regarding the gigantic and ever-increasing amount of World Wide Web resources that could be relevant to the teaching of a foreign business language it seems to me to be a futile exercise to list individual web pages. It is rather more advisable to look for so-called link lists on web pages that have already been designed as pages concerning themselves with the teaching of foreign business languages. A good starting point are also pages on teaching foreign languages in general, which as rule contain links to more specifically relevant pages. You will find the addresses of web pages offering such link lists in the appendix of this paper. For some purposes German web catalogues like Yahoo, Dino or Lycos may be sufficient.

It is however quite a time consuming exercise to find relevant material through general catalogues and search-engines (the usual aides for finding one's way through the ever growing information jungle) if you are preparing a special topic for a special lesson. Sticking with the example of Business German I want to mention a page which you can find under the address <http://www.wirtschaftsdeutsch.de>. This is the homepage of the Institute for International Communication based in Düsseldorf, Germany, which can serve as an introductory point of departure. Apart from providing various search aides the page offers a weekly info-mail with the latest developments in the field, a database for didactic material, information about language courses and further education for teachers and an on-line self-assessment test. The usage of all the services of the page is free of charge, a precondition for all the pages mentioned in this paper.

2.1. Individual information and further education

In order to be update with economic developments and trends different online-media can be used. The users can either go online themselves and check their favourite web pages for relevant information (pull principle) or subscribe to the services of free e-mail info letters in order to get the latest news and information in their respective field of studies (push principle). Links to constantly updated economic news services, the economic sections of newspapers, specialist journals and online magazines can e.g. be found on special interest pages like <http://www.wirtschaftsdeutsch.de>. This way these services are more quickly available than via search engines. Especially relevant and advisable are services that provide with the help of category and keyword search for the compilation of information according to one's own individual needs and choices.

Push media are daily, weekly and monthly e-mail newsletters which can be subscribed to simply by sending an e-mail to the relevant address. Like in all fields of online media the choice is large and one should carefully choose one's subscriptions in order not to produce an

information overkill. There is the possibility to subscribe to free economic newsletters (e.g. of Germany's international broadcasting station "Deutsche Welle") links to other newsletters can be found on the above mentioned web pages.

The pages of e.g. the Goethe Institute and other language schools and education institutions offer information on language exams and further education seminars for teachers. Other special interest pages enable the user to do well-directed searches for economic data and statistical numbers, to conduct market surveys of certain branches and to study the complete relevant paragraphs of trade laws in the original. These are possibilities used by economists themselves which are especially relevant for preparing and supporting lessons.

The possibilities to purposefully increase one's knowledge with the help of the Internet are enormous. In order to use them one should however keep in mind that this requires despite all the services on offer some self-discipline and the willingness to invest some time.

2.2. The World Wide Web as a source for authentic classroom material

Teaching projects using e-mails and direct web-integration get most attention in specialist didactic magazines, devoted to the use of the Internet. To me however this seems to be a wrong weighting keeping in mind the limited access most students and teachers have to the Internet. World-wide only a relatively small fraction of all teachers can use big enough computer rooms which would provide all students with a direct access to the Internet. More likely it is possible to transfer Internet activities to individual phases of learning (homework, projects, self-learning centres), but this requires that every individual learner has access to the Internet either at his or her place of work or studies or at home. Often enough these technical prerequisites are not given. Despite this it is neither very likely nor desirable that the use of personal computers becomes the dominant form of teaching and supersedes the work with other media, especially printed material.

After all the most fascinating quality of the Internet is its ability to improve traditional teaching. Every teacher can use the available information for further self education and will find in the Internet an enormous source for authentic up to date teaching material (reading texts, audio texts), exercises and information. To give only one example: Teachers teaching learners from certain companies will have a special interest for information in German from this company and its respective area of trade or business, information which can easily be obtained from the Internet.

Some teachers will also like to use in their lessons the latest numbers, facts and texts in order to supplement textbooks which usually are few years old. Up to date economic figures concerning salaries, taxes, trade balances of the last month, exchange rates and share prices from the previous day, recent developments in the job market, texts on the economic policies of the EU, topical information on a new business merger or a new finance minister, daily economic news and speeches of politicians and managers, all these information and figures are available as texts and audio texts and videos on the Internet.

Worth mentioning are also the many brochures, textbook extracts and exercises and audio texts that can be downloaded from special interest pages. The international German broadcasting station e.g. offers a whole business German learning programme consisting of 25 lessons, complete with exercise sheets, transcripts and audio texts.

Teachers of business German do not only find an enormous amount of authentic texts and up to date information but also a lot of material which has already been didactically prepared for the classroom.

Outlook

At present it is not very prophetic to predict that the confident use of foreign language Internet pages as part of the linguistic competence of students - including country-specific and technical aspects - will be a key qualification for anyone wanting to find employment in the economic sphere. At the same time the supply of relevant material with didactic potentials for the teaching of business German in the World Wide Web increases on a daily basis. It is therefore a daily challenge to get to know these resources and to make them usable for one's own teaching. The basic criteria one should bear in mind is efficiency. After the novelty of surfing and sending e-mails has worn off and become part of one's daily routine one will ask oneself during every Internet activity if the valuable time used is really worth the sacrifice, especially if a lot of time and energy is spent fighting technical problems and waiting for the information to appear on the screen.

This is no argument against the Internet, but an appeal for its reflective and selective use in the classroom within the context of traditional language learning methods and activities. With the help of the Internet linguistically based economic activities can be effectively simulated with a degree of authenticity which has previously been quite difficult to achieve. The use of the new medium is not always easy and demands not only self-discipline and the willingness to spend time in front of the screen but also requires a number of new skills which teachers and students alike have to learn. But apart from all problems and difficulties the use of the Internet can dramatically improve the quality of foreign language teaching abroad (especially business language), which is characterised by a high demand for further education on the part of the teachers and by difficulties to obtain topical up to date teaching material.

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