

# Autonomous German Language Learning on the Internet

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The topic of this paper is autonomous language learning on Internet as an enhanced German language class. According to the guideline of the Council of Europe 2001, it should take at least 200 learning hours to reach the lowest proficiency level at which the learner can manage to some extent in everyday situations. But having, at most, two classes per week, Japanese university students who are learning German as a new foreign language have less than half the necessary time. Therefore, it would be a great plus for the acquisition of foreign languages like German if there were ample learning opportunities offered outside the class. As one possibility, we introduce an on-line German course which the author is now developing in the framework of a virtual university project at Hiroshima University. In this context we also discuss the features and significance of WebCT as authoring software for e-Learning.

本稿では、ドイツ語授業の拡張としての、インターネットを利用した自律学習について論じる。ヨーロッパ議会が2001年に公刊した学習レベルの基準に従えば、学習者が日常的な問題解決を行うことのできる最低限のレベルの到達に必要な学習時間数は最低約200時間である。しかし、大学における初習外国語としてのドイツ語の学習時間数は、週2回授業を受ける場合でもその2分の1以下しかない。したがって、インターネットを利用し授業外に安定した学習の場を提供することは、ドイツ語のような初習外国語の

習得にとって決定的に重要な意味を持つ。本稿では、このような場の事例として、広島大学バーチャルユニバーシティ推進事業の中で筆者らが現在構築中のオンラインドイツ語講座を紹介するとともに、授業と自律学習を統合した学習環境を用意するe-Learning用ソフトWebCTの特徴と意義について論じる。

## The Internet as new integrated learning environment

This paper deals with autonomous second foreign language (2FL) learning on the Internet as a way of enhancing the teaching of German. Because of the lack of learning time in the regular language classes at most Japanese universities, learning opportunities outside the classroom play an important part in successful foreign language acquisition.

### *Lack of learning hours*

Most students who learn German in Japan presently learn this language for only one year in classes of 90 minutes each, one or two times a week, according to the selected course. That is, at most 45 to 90 hours of regular instruction, including orientations and tests (Investigation Committee on German Language Education in Japan, 1999, p.11-16). Concerning the relationship between learning hours and attainable levels, the council of Europe, after 10 years of research, set forth comprehensive guidelines (Baldegger & Mueller & Schneider & Naef, 1980; Ek & Trim, 1998; Council

of Europe, 2001). Accordingly, Level A2 (Waystage) is the lowest level at which students can, with difficulty, cope with everyday situations. (Council Europe, 2001, p.110). Following is a short description of Level A2:

### *Level A2 [Way stage]*

Communication in enough high frequency everyday or job-related language to be able to meet needs of a concrete type: understanding of frequently recurring texts and phrases; communicating in predictable situations and simple, short routine exchanges; direct exchange of information on everyday and job-related matters; oral and written production of short, simple texts about everyday events and personal experiences; differentiated grammatical structures, vocabulary of about 1200 words (<http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/dia/ksb.htm>).

Level A2 corresponds to elementary level II, and to reach this about 200 learning hours are required. Comparing this with the class hours of German learners in Japan, we see that even with 2 classes per week, students have less than half the required amount of instruction time. How can we deal with this? Should we give up on Level A2 from the beginning and be content with Level A1 (Breakthrough), where only a few phrases and primitive sentences can be mastered as described below:

*Level A1 [Breakthrough]*

Communication related to everyday situations: understanding of the highest frequency vocabulary and of elementary phrases, putting simple questions, initiation of and response to simple statements, production of simple phrases and sentences about people and places; production of short texts; knowledge of basic grammatical structures; vocabulary of about 500 words (<http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/dia/ksb.htm>).

*Societal requirements and classroom reality*

Nowadays, Japanese society demands visible results from FL teaching at universities. Two issues are especially prominent: first, students have to reach a certain level of (foreign) language ability, which can then be practically used. Second, students should be satisfied with the teaching (Sekiguchi, 1993; Tanaka, 1994; Japanese German Teachers Association, 1995).

Considering these societal requirements, as well as the essential lack of classroom hours, German teachers face an impossible task. Our students are young adults and have, according to their age, variegated interests and knowledge levels. If, because of the lack of learning time in German teaching, we would only proceed in small steps, we would, right from the start, have to restrict

our aims to the bare minimum. If, however, after even one year of instruction, our students could only utter a few general phrases and primitive sentences, such as “Guten Tag, wie geht es Ihnen” (Hello, how are you?) or “Wo wohnen Sie jetzt?” (Where do you live now?), they would probably ask, why they are bothering to learn German, only to be able to communicate about such simple and boring matters. On the other hand, if we introduce interesting topics in our teaching, great “jumps” would have to be made in grammar and vocabulary, and this would result in a lack of time for oral practice and communication tasks. Attaining a well-balanced foreign language acquisition seems to be impossible.

*Current approaches in the 1990s*

To find a way out of this conflict, a number of approaches were started in the 1990s in Japan. One was the introduction of intensive courses with a more or less well-designed learning curriculum and 4 classes per week for at least 2 years. A typical example is the intensive course at the law faculty of Keio University (Sambe, 1999). Students can reach Level B2 [vantage/Mittelstufe II] (Council of Europe, 2001) in 3 years. In this extended framework, students learn step by step with a sure focus on attaining a certain meaningful language level.

A different approach is the organization of group

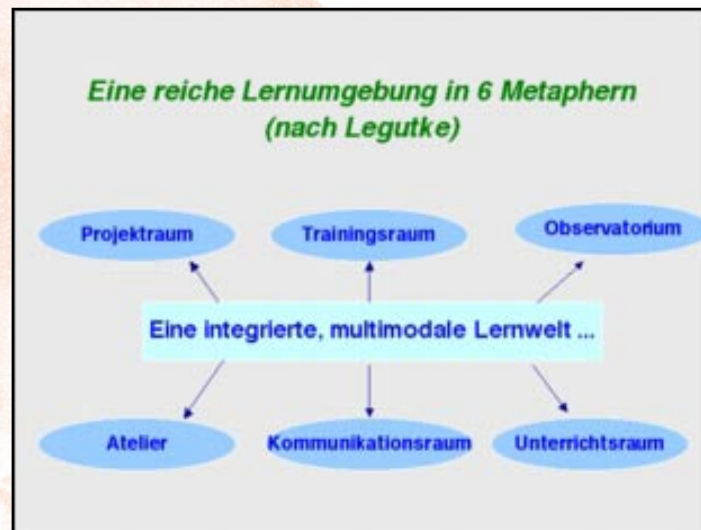
travel to a German speaking area in order to take part in language courses (Investigation Committee on German Language Education in Japan, 1999, p.22; Okochi, 1994). Both approaches practically serve to extend learning time, motivate the students and provide them with authentic communicative experiences. These approaches are good models for German teaching in Japan, especially for those students who are far above average in their learning motivation and abilities. But such models cannot be applied to all students, because not all are ready and able to learn German intensively in addition to their majors. We do not have enough teachers or the financial means available. We are thus still looking for a model for the usual teaching of the majority of German learners.

### *The Internet as a new integrated learning environment*

I see a large potential in the learning environments that have only arisen with the global extension of the Internet (Iwasaki, 2001a). Various learning activities can be transferred from the classroom to the area of autonomous learning and the whole teaching frame can be extended. The importance of the Internet thus does not lie in fundamental but small additions to extant learning programs, but rather in a future possibility to create an enhanced, but at the same time integrated, new learning environment by way of autonomous learning.

### Learning activities for autonomous learning

Prof. Rueschoff, the president of Eurocall, in his presentation at the CALL-Symposium at Hiroshima University 2000, introduced the six parts of a rich learning environment (eine reiche Lernumgebung) as a multimodal integrated learning environment (eine integrierte multimodale Lernwelt) in terms of a room (or area) metaphor (see figure 1) (Rueschoff & Ritter, 2001, p. 229-230).



This model sees teachers as tutors in the classroom area (teaching centre), the performance of practical activities as a training area (training centre), the

furthering of metacognitive discovery procedures when learning as observatory area (observatory), the solving of communicative tasks as a communication area (communication centre) and finally the process- or result-oriented project work as a project area (project room) or gallery (workshop) (Legutke, 1998). Learning activities on the Internet concern mainly parts of the training area, some parts of the classroom area and a small part of the communication area.

Using the Internet, we can perform the following activities as autonomous learning, e.g.:

1. Grammar and vocabulary, reading and listening practice (training area)
2. Dialogue practice (training area)
3. Partner practice in the strictly controlled phase (training area)
4. Repetition and setting of contents learnt in class (classroom area)
5. Unstructured practice (communication area)

In the following, we want to demonstrate this with an example from an on-line German course under construction on the Internet.

### Building an on-line German course on the Internet

Within the framework of the so-called virtual university

project, my colleague M. Yoshida and I have been creating a website where various on-line learning opportunities are offered to the learners of German (see figure 2).



This project is a cooperative effort between a number of national universities and the National Institute for Multimedia Education. The main aim is to lay the technical and contents foundation for a future virtual university (Hiroshima University, 2000). To be able to offer anything at all, at first anyway, non-copyrighted, free, personal, teaching material is necessary. To this end, we first developed a German video language course for

beginners “Freut mich!” (“My pleasure” in both senses). This course contains 10 lessons with 2 short dialogue scenes each (see figure 3). We have only recently started to digitalize these dialogues in RealAudio-Format and put them on the website (see below).



There are two ways to use digital videos as training material. On the one hand, they can serve as pattern for dialogue practice. On the other hand, they can serve as material for listening practice. In both cases, videos with their visual information have an advantage over audio material. Figure 4 is an example of a website for video listening practice. The left frame contains questions

about the video contents, and the right side has a button to start the video. Work with video on the Internet consists of 5 steps, and figure 4 contains steps 2 and 3.



1. use title and picture to make assumptions about the situation
2. give tasks and hints about what should be taken from the video scene
3. show the video
4. continue work with the tasks
5. show the video with German subtitles

In this example, we used Hot Potatoes as authoring program. Designed at Victoria University, this is an authoring program for developing online practice for FL learning. (figure 5).



Using Hot Potatoes, the following 6 kinds of learning programs can be created on the Internet, even without specialty knowledge of programming:

- a multiple-choice exercise: JBC
- a short answer exercise: JQuiz
- a jumbled word or sentence exercise: JMix
- crossword exercise: JCross

- matching exercise: JMatch
- a fill-in blank-exercise: JCloze

We started creating the on-line German course only early this year. At present, it contains only a host of grammar practices and tests with automatic evaluation, dialogue practices and activities with video. We plan to also supply it with more listening and vocabulary practice, a phonetic course for self learners, a grammar course with a combination of self-discovery components and systematic explanations, and finally, communicative games (Iwasaki, 2001a, p113-116).

### Autonomous learning as extension of usual classroom teaching

Speaking of autonomous learning on the Internet, we normally imagine learning programs independent of the usual classroom teaching. But considering the present level of information and communication technology, especially the insufficient installation of the so-called information highways, it is still quite unrealistic to speak of a completely independent distance language learning course on the Internet. Therefore we have to start with enhancing the present teaching by autonomous learning on the Internet. In this context, WebCT is of special interest. This software, developed at British Columbia University, is, like “Blackboard” (Kajita, 2001), software for creating distance courses on the Internet. There are

already a large number of Internet courses; some are even set up for commercial purposes, using WebCT.

WebCT's main characteristic is the absence of a clear-cut distinction between in-class learning and out of class learning: Both are linked and influence each other. WebCt can be used for on-line practices (figure 6).



It can also be used for usual classroom teaching, e.g. to announce the curriculum at the beginning of the term or to give homework to be submitted before the next class (see figure 7).



Students can also communicate with each other or submit their homework to the teacher. This software thus offers a framework in which classroom teaching and autonomous learning on the Internet are integrated. Unlike Hot Potatoes, WebCT is not designed especially for language teaching and is thus not able to offer as many practice types. But WebCT can also embed websites made with Hot Potatoes (see figure 8).





In this sense we have already fulfilled the technical preconditions for offering an on-line (German) foreign language-learning environment.

## Conclusion

There is still no syllabus for such a learning environment. Also, there is, at least for German, still a paucity of interesting learning materials on the Internet. Much remains to be done.

Often the question is asked, whether there isn't the danger that all German classes will be replaced by autonomous learning on the Internet and all German teachers will be axed. The presumption of this question is misguided in at least two senses: On the one hand, not all activities in the classroom can be replaced by autonomous learning. On the other hand, what can be attained in a usual classroom teaching is simply not enough. We should rather go for much more.

## Bio data

Katsumi Iwasaki is Associate Professor at Hiroshima University. His research interest includes CALL and TELL, German language education and computer linguistics. He is now developing the on-line German Course in the Virtual University Project of his university <<http://flare.media.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/>>

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