Are Our Learners' Heads Really Empty? Designing a New Lesson and Textbook Conception

Martina Gunske von Kölln

Research Center for Higher Education Tohoku University

After briefly discussing the demands on teaching foreign languages, especially for a second or subsequent foreign language, the author argues for designing a new lesson and textbook conception which, of necessity, pays due attention to learners' existing knowledge and previous FL learning (Part 1). After giving an example of the very first contact in a new foreign language, the author selects a topic for the first chapter of a new textbook and demonstrates the activities for an introductory lesson in German (Part 2). In part 3 possible problems and advantages, as well as transfer of this conception into other FL teaching situations are discussed. Part 4 concludes with the final considerations and future prospects. While this paper concentrates on subsequent FL learning, the whole conception is - nevertheless - also adaptable for any FL learning.

筆者は外国語の教育、特に第二外国語等の教育に何が要求されているかを述べた上で、学習者が既に持っている知識やそれまでの外国語学習に着目した教授法と教科書の新たなコンセプトを提供する（第1部）。次に、新しい外国語との最初の接触の例を挙げ、入門教科書の第一課のための話題を選び、最初の授業における教室活動を紹介する（第2部）。更に、そのコンセプトの利点及び問題点に言及し（第3部）、最後はこれまでの考察をまとめ、将来的展望でしめくくる（第4部）。　本論文は、第二外国語等について論じたものであるが、その論述内容は、外国語学習一般に広く適用することが可能である。

Introduction

In a world narrowing because of globalisation and contact with other countries and cultures, our students learn a variety of languages, such as English, Japanese, German etc. A survey of textbooks for different languages revealed that the introductory chapter inevitably starts with the topic "self-introduction". For someone who has already learned one or more foreign languages this is very boring. In general, teachers and textbook authors should consider the (pre-) knowledge the learners bring to the study of subsequent foreign languages.

1. Pre-considerations for the teaching of a subsequent foreign language (xFL)

In Japan and many other countries, FLs such as for example French, Chinese and German are taught not as first but as second, third or subsequent FLs. In most cases, the learners have previously learned English as a FL or even speak it as their mother tongue. This fact, however, is rarely taken into consideration by teachers or textbook authors.

In this paper, instead of the common term "second foreign language (2FL)" the more differentiating term "subsequent foreign language (xFL)" is chosen in order to emphasize that the following considerations are applicable not only to the second but also to the third or subsequent foreign languages in accordance with EU policy as regards multi-lingualism.

This paper describes an attempt at designing new xFL textbooks and lessons which pay due consideration to the learners' existing knowledge of FLs (Bausch & Heid, 1990).

Beginning to learn a new FL means setting out on a trip into a new, unknown world. Learners face the new language with excitement and curiosity, in some cases even with the pleasure of anticipation. Pleasure and fun are very important for learning as we know from Jan Amos Comenius in his "Didactica Magna" some 300 years ago (Schnabel, 2002). Often, however, this excitement is suppressed right at the beginning, before even opening the new textbook. For in many cases, the novelty is, in fact, nothing new since we already know what is awaiting us.

The following two questions arise:

- Why do teachers and textbook authors reduce the excitement of the learners by focusing on the ever-unchanging starting topic "getting to know each other"?

Surveying beginner-level textbooks of several languages has revealed that the same topic is almost always used for the first chapter of the textbook. Although "getting to know each other" is very important for communication, this is not reason enough to always choose this as main topic. This paper will give an alternative lesson plan, treating self-introduction only as a subordinate topic (section (3) of part 2).

- Why do we insist on the learners' lack of knowledge of previously studied foreign languages and treat the learners as if they had never studied any foreign language before?

However poor the learners' knowledge of e.g. English may be, they have at least learned enough of it to interfere with their learning of German. For example, this concerns the case of the so-called "false friends", resulting from similarities between English and German. Therefore, it is a misconception to think of learners as "tabula rasa".

Let us consider one typical example. While in English "I" is written with a capital letter, its German synonym "ich" is written in small letters. In many textbooks, however, the word "I" is only introduced in the beginning of sentences and therefore the "i" in "ich" appears only as capital letter, leading to the conclusion that learners think that the "i" in "ich" is always written in capital, like the English "I". The frequency of this mistake alone proves that our learners have rather "full heads".

Considering the fact that such mistakes in German can result from knowledge of other languages such as English suggests that we should cope with the phenomenon of "false friends" right from the start.

2. A new textbook design

2.1. Selection of a topic for the first chapter of a textbook

Based on the considerations in Part 1, the author has designed a new topic for the first chapter of a textbook for (mainly Japanese) students of German with some knowledge of English. People everywhere seem to approach the topic of culinary culture with curiosity and interest. In Japan, too, eating and drinking plays a vital role. Even on short trips, enjoying the local food is one of the highlights, as can be ascertained from many tourist information flyers. Thus, this latent interest provides a suitable topic for a first unit.

 Rather than theoretically discussing the approach, the following section introduces the first lesson, which consists of five activities:

(1) Language comparison: Pronunciation and Spelling (English - German)
(2) Language comparison: Vowels (Japanese - English - German)
(3) "Getting to know each other" as a subordinate topic
(4) Using pre-knowledge to discover grammar: articles across languages
(5) Using mnemonic techniques to link articles and nouns

2.2. An example for the very first lesson

Comparing with other languages from the very first lesson

 (1) The very first activity deals with food and drinks; one column in English, the other, in this case, in German (refer to Figure 1). The students have to choose whether a) the spelling, or b) the pronunciation provided by native speakers of English and German, normally on tape, are similar or different.

	ENGLISCH	DEUTSCH	✐	👂
1	GOOD MORNING	Guten Morgen		
11	BEER	BIER		
14	BUTTER	BUTTER		

gleich (同じ): +   nicht gleich (違う): -   ähnlich (似ている): ~

Figure 1: Part of similar words list

 Words such as butter and Butter have the same spelling but differ in pronunciation, while Bier and beer have nearly similar pronunciation but differ in spelling. With this activity, the learners realize that there are many similarities between English and German, but also, or rather because of this, they have to take care to avoid mistakes because of "false friends".

(2) Next, the comparison of vowels (pronounced by the teacher for German and by a learner for Japanese) reveals surprising similarities between Japanese and German in contrast to English (refer to Figure 2).
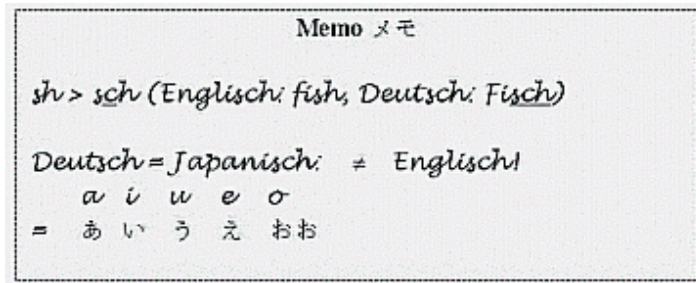

Figure 2: A student's note

In short, where we would usually have greeting formulae, in this new conception the learners compare German with Japanese and English.

"Getting to know each other" as subordinate topic

(3) The next phase attends to the need to get to know each other in class. In most other textbooks, this topic is the central part of their first unit, and activities accompanying it merely focus on the linguistic aspects. This new conception, however, focuses on actually getting to know the partner by using German as a "tool" for communication. After an introduction and initial practice of the necessary structures, learners wander the classroom with a pencil and a "Klassen-Namensliste" (name-list of the participants in the class, refer to Figure 3), asking the others their names.

Figure 3: Sample from a student's "Klassen-Namensliste"

This activity will be repeated several times until the list is completed. First the learners may write down five to ten names. Later on they have to find the corresponding "faces" to these names and ask those partners again, e.g. about further personal characteristics, such as phone numbers (for contacting outside of class). Furthermore they can ask about their favourite drink ("Lieblingsgetränk") or to which group the partner belongs ("Gruppenname"). In a large class of 50 or more learners it would take about a month to complete the whole list. Therefore, this activity offers an opportunity for repetition of contact behaviour (communication with the same person) as well as linguistic aspects (phrases to be used). The list can be used to establish and extend contact at any time.

A further advantage of this approach is that students do not sit still and hide behind their books. As we know, motor activities support learning and concentration. Heinrich Pestalozzi already emphasized about 250 years ago that good education should connect "Kopf, Herz und Hand" (head, heart

and hand) (Schnabel, 2002, p. 35). This also alleviates boredom and tiredness of learners.

"die Pizza – das Bier – der Wein" –

Using one's pre-knowledge to discover on one's own

In the third section, the article in German is introduced. Japanese does not have an article but the learners recognize it from their English learning. Especially in the case of learners who have already learnt languages such as French and Spanish, we do not have to limit ourselves to English, but can demonstrate the articles across the languages (refer to Figure 5).

(4) Learners are given word cards differing in colour according to the grammatical gender, which determines the definite article. The learners are then asked to attach these to the coloured list on the blackboard (refer to Figure 4). Thus the colour of the word cards help place the nouns and the items "der" "die" "das" correctly and link them mentally. A rich source of resources regarding mnemonic techniques, starting from the antiquity is Sperber (1989).

(5) Afterwards, the learners are asked to enter the still unknown German nominative case definite articles in another language-comparative list (refer to Figure 5). This time, no help by the teacher is required, the learners have already discovered the articles themselves by finding them in the coloured list above (refer to Figure 4).

While German is usually considered difficult, learners can see here that it is not only German that has three articles.

die	der	das
Milch	Name	Verb
Butter	Kaffee	Wasser
Pizza	Fisch	Bier
Tomate	Salat	Salz
Cola	Wein	Ei

Figure 4: Blackboard list containing word cards

Artikel	Sprache 言語
the	Englisch 英語
le, la	Französisch 仏語
el, la, lo	Spanisch スペイン語
d___ (♀) d___ (♂) d___ (O)	Deutsch ドイツ語

Figure 5: Article comparative list

With this activity, we approach the end of the first lesson in German. Rather than merely repeating a practice from learning another FL some years earlier, this time there are probably some "aha-effects".

Furthermore, the learners become aware of the fact that they can use their knowledge (of other languages) and that therefore the new language becomes somehow easier to learn and use.

3. Discussion

There are both problems which might occur, as well as advantages, resulting from this choice of topic for the first textbook unit.

This approach is an alternative start into a new foreign language, but does it make sense? The participants of this workshop had a chance to exchange views with each other in order to decide which parts were meaningful and which not. The discussion was not necessarily limited to German. Rather, one could imagine how this topic could be transferred to other foreign languages and whether there are more suitable topics.

The discussion was guided along the following questions:

a) Based on the preceding examples of a first lesson, consider how such a textbook unit about food and drinks could be continued.
- Which (other) activities would you like to have included?
- Are there any contents, which could not be practiced due to a lack of language knowledge?
b) What criteria would have to be considered for creating the activities?
c) What kind of difficulties can be expected by using this topic as a starter for zero-beginners?
d) Compared to the common first unit on "getting to know each other", what (dis-) advantages does this approach have?
e) Are there language-specific differences? Are there taboos to be avoided?

In comparison with the common self-introduction, this very first unit on food and drinking was received positively by the participants of the workshop and especially, the learners themselves. These are things, which can be seen and touched, which is stimulating. In contrast to asking the neighbour's name, which is meaningfully possible only once, it is possible to speak about eating and drinking also in later lessons without appearing to be strange or offensive.

While cultural information on e.g. eating habits cannot yet be shared in the foreign language, videos and real foods and drinks can of course serve as starting point to discussion in the mother tongue of the learners.

The problem of having to use the accusative case in German with verbs such as "essen" (eat) and "trinken" (drink) can be solved by omitting the article (grammatically correct in a generic meaning, as is often the case in general talks at the beginning of relationships) or by providing work sheets. Regarding a participant's question, about using a prescribed textbook, where eating and drinking resurface in unit 6 and whether he has to treat it twice, we suggest;

- omitting this chapter (and proceed); or
- using this chapter for e.g. revision of the vocabulary and grammatical structures in a different context. Further information on designing a textbook can be found in Häussermann (1996) and Kast (1994).

4. Final considerations and future prospects

In conclusion, one can say that this approach seems to be a viable alternative to first units of the usual textbook, and by its attractiveness retains the excitement of the learners. Just by recognizing one's own ability to use existing knowledge, e.g.

international words (words being almost identical in several languages), the barrier, which comes down when a learner is confronted with too many new items can be removed. Learners realize that they already know something, which can be utilized for their learning of the new FL.

A final problem remains: For some of the tasks, a rather large vocabulary of nouns (e.g. various dishes on a menu) are required and thus practiced. However, only a limited number of verbs suffices. How the problem of fewer nouns and more verbs can be solved will be discussed in my next presentation at JALT 2003. Meanwhile you will find interesting literature in the publications of either Bimmel and Rampillon (2000) and/or Rampillon (1996).

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