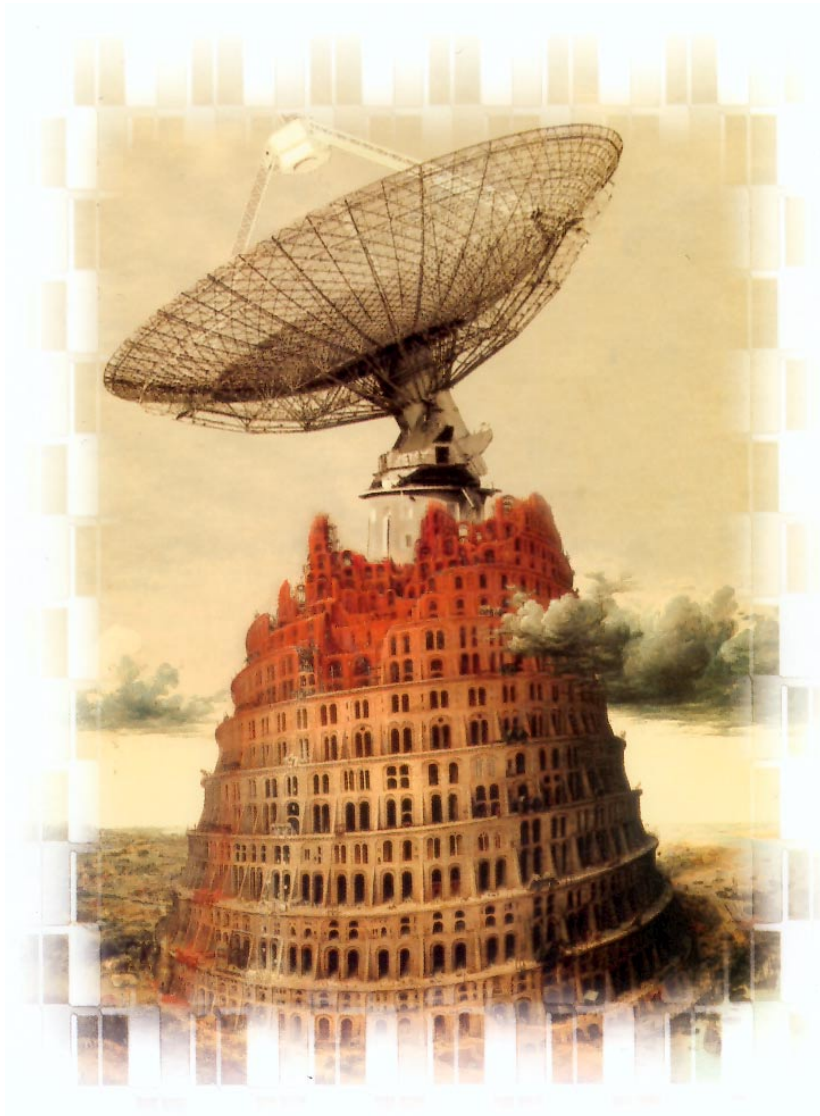


Beyond Babel: **language learning online**



uschi felix

with contributions by practitioners

**InterDeutsch - Going solo:
First steps into virtual teaching on a zero
budget.**

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Name of course: *InterDeutsch*
Name of developers: Claudia Popov (all materials), Sven Liese (special applets),
and Anton Popov (graphics)
Budget: \$0
Mode of delivery: Distance education
URL of site: <http://www.interdeutsch.de>

The next step for the student is to express an opinion about the topic for the week, first in the writing task, and then, within a wider context, in the chat with the teacher. It is interesting to see how students use segments of the given text, and how they vary usage during the chat. It is important for both teacher and student to be genuinely interested in the other's opinions and experiences. This is not simply a language lesson, but a meeting between two individuals of different age, profession, culture, personal experience and, perhaps, gender. This is an important and natural driving force for the student's output.

- You will need these verbs when you want to describe a process: *sich entwickeln, sich sammeln, sich bilden, sich trennen, sich vergrößern, sich unterscheiden* etc. Choose a natural phenomenon that you can explain (for example, the origin of a thunderstorm or of a volcanic eruption) and describe it.

In general, students feel insecure and seek the teacher's help for certain grammar problems. Additional exercises help them fill the gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

- Relevant additional exercises in the Studienbibliothek:

The article game, Wortrix: Nature

The word search game: Weather

- Topic for the week's chat: Global climate change

In your opinion, who is to blame for the changes in the climate from which mankind has been suffering in recent years? Industrialised nations? Natural processes of change? Should or can we put a stop to the process? In your opinion, what needs to be done now?

At first sight, this might seem to be too little material for anything of great substance to be learnt, but for the students, such a lesson means a lot of very intensive work, particularly as communication with the teacher is conducted entirely in the target language. Usually, students are highly motivated to give their best in German, even in a simple e-mail exchange about the next chat date, and the power of what might seem a trivial activity should not be underestimated. Most students have never experienced such intensive communication in German as in the Interdeutsch course. It is worth mentioning that most students need more than a week for each lesson, and we give them up to three months for the whole course to make sure that they have the time to use all the additional materials the teacher might have suggested.

A very important part of the InterDeutsch site has turned out to be the Studienbibliothek. This section contains freely accessible interactive exercises, tests and games on three levels (basic, intermediate and advanced), Hits für Kids, links to Web dictionaries, publishing companies and sites about the German spelling

reform – materials which give a picture of the quality that can be expected in the courses. The section contains many different types of exercises and games in the areas of grammar, vocabulary, text comprehension, semantics and phonetics. Exercises take the form of multiple choice tests, short answer questions, Cloze tests or gap-filling, correct order exercises (syntax and semantics), crossword games (with audio files), matching lists, drag and drop, text reconstruction exercises, storyboard, hangman, jumbled words, the magic board, a word search game, the memory game, Wortrix, and the listening exercise „Find the way“.

The last three games, all created by InterDeutsch, are variants of well-known models. The memory game requires antonyms to be found. „Wortrix“ is a linguistic variant of the well-known Tetrix, with students having to assign words to the correct article, generic terms or some other categories. It seems to be a favourite of German teachers and we have several times been asked for the applet. „Find the way“ is an exercise in aural comprehension, with students having to move a car through a city map according to the oral information provided.

The obvious success of the Studienbibliothek might be ascribed to the fact that most of the exercises are accompanied by comments that give a summary of the relevant grammar rules, help with vocabulary, or explanations of the answers. This means that students have a real opportunity to improve their language skills.

Hits für Kids has been created for young people who like German pop music and rap. It contains four German hits that spent some weeks in the Top Ten. Students are directed to the stars' home pages where they can hear the original sound files and try to understand authentic information about the singers. This section gives an idea of how the Web tasks of the InterDeutsch courses are designed. It contains the following elements:

- MfG by Die Fantastischen Vier which is a satirical song about German abbreviations;
- Suparichie where students have to correct the grammatical chaos of the original
- Xavier Naido's Führ mich an Licht - a listening and text reconstruction exercise;
- 10 kleine Jägermeister by Die toten Hosen - a fill-the-gap exercise on the past tense.

Technical approach

The programming equipment used for all the InterDeutsch Materials is quite unspectacular. Most tests and exercises were created with the authoring programs Hot Potatoes 3.0 and TexToys. Another interesting source is Quia which stores exercises created by users. Its weakness is that it requires English as the language of navigation and comment. Much better in that respect is Headlines-Makers. The following exercise, which requires the names of parts of the body to be dragged into the appropriate position, was created by one of its programs, PlaceMaker3:



Other JavaScript applets – like probably the most popular InterDeutsch game Galgenraten – were found, free for the taking, on private Web sites. So far, only three applets have been created especially – the article game Wortrix, the memory game, and the listening exercise Find the Way – but others will follow.

The layout of the exercise pages has been made with the simple and free HTML editor Arachnophilia which allows beginners to learn HTML. It can accommodate changes in the page sources, such as inserting JavaScript applets. Arachnophilia writes pure HTML code without any disturbing additions such as those produced by FrontPage. This has meant that the site layout, especially of Hot Potatoes exercises, could be improved step by step. JPEG and GIF graphics were created with the help of the usual graphics programs. The animated GIFs were also created by freeware like GIF Construction Set.

Audio files were created using Syntrillium Cool Edit 96 and the Real Encoder. The production of phonetic and listening exercises, especially, would not have been possible without the professional advice and technical know-how of our parent company. In any case, the production of audio files was one of the more time-consuming tasks.

Certainly, more could be done to make the InterDeutsch sites even more attractive and professional to match the excellent standard of sites like Lina und Leo, the online course of the Goethe-Institut. On the other hand, we deliberately chose to minimise special effects, like background sound, video sequences and the use of a

Web phone, in order not to distract visitors from the essentials, and to keep the site user-friendly for the average student who might otherwise feel overtaxed by the technology. There is no need to implement everything that is technically possible!

Feedback and problems

At the end of each course the students were asked to provide a short critical summary. Generally, the reactions to the content were positive. What students enjoyed most was the personal contact with the teacher; the majority of them were at an advanced level of German and needed, above all, a native speaker's pedagogical input.

The following aspects proved problematical:

- Because of German consumer protection laws, and technical aspects like the costs of a secure server, payment has only been possible on presentation of an account after enrolment. Some students in Arab countries have obviously still not received the bill! Others gave up when they found they had to pay considerable bank fees for a money transfer to Germany.
- A further problem was the enrolment of minors since, under German law, they are not allowed to sign contracts.
- Some students were not aware of the difference between their entrance test score and their own evaluation of their German skills, requested in the booking form.
- Some students were not very familiar with the use of the Internet. They could not handle the installation of the chat program which was needed right from the beginning for the information chat, and had problems with the required plug-ins.
- Others did not expect the work to be so intensive and gave up for lack of time.

The well-known disadvantages of Web-based courses mentioned in Felix (1998) did not really scare off the students. They had obviously already faced them.

The feedback on the exercises in the Studienbibliothek has been of interest. Many teachers from universities and schools all over the world wrote to report on how they were using the material, and how much their students enjoyed the exercises and games. The same response was received from across all user age groups. The data we collected provided us with information about who the typical German learners are, and what they are hoping to find on the Internet. As the experiences of the first two years of InterDeutsch have shown, there are many beginners and students at a low intermediate level, who are struggling with difficult German grammar, and who are grateful for interesting and varied exercises with clear and

helpful comments. The more general the vocabulary and grammar subjects are, the better the exercises fit into any curriculum, and the more they are used by teachers and students.

The fact that not many German learners are at a level that allows fluent communication, has changed our future directions. Instead of relatively expensive individualised courses for intermediate and advanced learners, what seems to be worth developing is a set of simple, general and cheap units of about five exercises per subject that would supplement other teaching materials at every level. This may be the central lesson to be drawn from our experience, and may well serve as a guideline for future projects.

The main problems for any further development are technical. We need to install password-controlled access to the new units, create a chat room or a MOO, with special features like different font colours and invisible remarks directed to individual chat partners, and arrange secure payment by credit card. The investment required is considerable. At this point, unfortunately, nothing more can be done with so little funding.

Future plans and prospects

Regardless of the critical issue of the financial resources required, the future progress of InterDeutsch is clear. New materials are ready to be offered. Typical subjects like shopping, health and food, as well as grammar problems like the subjunctive or verb tenses, can be worked on. New features, like more listening texts and exercises, new types of tests and games, and comics, will be included in the units.

The aim is for materials to go beyond what is available in the Studienbibliothek in various ways:

- Clearly explained grammar hints for each subject
- Effective vocabulary training with a large number of audio files
- A well structured order of items (exercises, games and tests)
- Web tasks and links to motivate visits to authentic German Web sites
- A final test for each unit as a guide for self-directed work
- A glossary in English and French to ensure complete understanding.

More than the one-off exercises in the Studienbibliothek, these units are intended to supply teachers and -students with additional materials that they can use.

No matter how much of this turns out to be realisable, we have been surprised that so many people from so many different countries have contacted the InterDeutsch

Web site and have had fun using the materials. I would like to thank all those who have encouraged my work by providing helpful feedback as well as compliments. Their responses will be a stimulus to tackle the hurdles that we are currently facing.

Biodata

Dr. Claudia Popov is a GSL teacher in Leipzig, Germany. She has worked for the Saxon Ministry of Culture and Education on the Commission for the GSL curriculum, and has experience in teacher education and the in-service training of teachers in linguistics, language acquisition and CALL.

References

Literature

Felix, U. (1998) *Virtual Language Learning: Finding the Gems Amongst the Pebbles*, Melbourne: Language Austratia Ltd.

Tschirner, Erwin (1999) „Der Natural Approach: Prinzipien der Unterrichtswirklichkeit“, in Barkowski, H. & Wolf, A. (Hrsg.), *Beiträge der Jahrestagung Deutsch als Fremdsprache an der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (Materialien Deutsch als Fremdsprache 52 (S. 64-78)*, Regensburg: FaDaF

(<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/herder/lehrende/tschirner/texte/tschirner2.htm>)

Web sites

InterDeutsch

Studienbibliothek

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/studieni.htm>

Individual exercises

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/galgen.html>

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/wordsearch2.html>

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/wordswap/wortrix.html>

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/survival/map/map.html>

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/memory/memory.html>

<http://www.interdeutsch.de/mensch-ns3.htm>

Free services:

Half-Baked Software (Hot Potatoes)

<http://Web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked>

bcentral Link exchange

<http://member.linkexchange.com>

Arachnophilia HTML editor

<http://www.arachnoid.com>

The Applet Depot

<http://www.ericharshbarger.com:80/java/>

Headlines - Makers

<http://lang.swarthmore.edu/makers>

Quia

<http://www.quia.com>

Parsimony - Free guestbooks

<http://parsimony.net>

Other Web sites:

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

<http://www.iik-duesseldorf.de>

University of South Florida

<http://nosferatu.cas.usf.edu/languages/german/germlinks>

University of North Carolina

<http://www.uncg.edu/~lxlprc/german.html>

Alfred-Wegener-Institut Zentrum für Polar- und Meeresforschung

<http://www.awi-bremerhaven.de/Eistour/index-d.html>

Travlang's Dictionaries

<http://dictionaries.travlang.com/GermanEnglish>

Lina und Leo

<http://www.goethe.de/z/50/linaleo/mainmen2.htm>

BEYOND BABEL: LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE is an essential guide for:

- Teachers who want to develop their own materials on the Web
- Teachers who are interested in integrating interesting Web sites and ideas into their curriculum
- Teachers and researchers interested in students' perceptions of the Web environment
- Anyone who wishes to refresh a language, or get a feel for a new one, in the comfort of their own home
- Anybody who wants to learn more about approaches to Web-based language teaching.

It offers a warts and all presentation of what is currently being done in Web-based language learning by a group of practising experts. It is unique in combining reflections on developments, practice and research in a refreshingly jargon-free style, drawing on the experience of hands-on teachers, professional and amateur developers, and students of all ages in a variety of approaches and settings. The book presents a substantial body of new research into students' perceptions of the Web environment and the relative influence of learning strategies, learning styles and study preferences. It also contains a substantially updated and expanded version of the material published in the bestselling *Virtual Language Learning: Finding the Gems Amongst the Pebbles*, including approximately 600 useful language learning Web sites. This is also available on an accompanying CD-ROM, where all sites have direct links.



Professor Uschi Felix is Director of ArtsIT and Associate Dean (IT) at Monash University in Melbourne. She has a research background in applied linguistics and, during the last decade, has focused on the development, integration and evaluation of multimedia software and Web sites. She has published widely on the use of technology in language teaching.

