ReCALL **12** (1): 27–34. Printed in the United Kingdom

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Computer mediated communication: learning German online in Australia

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of computer-mediated communication technologies in the context of teaching German by distance mode in Australia. More conventional delivery modes such as audiocassettes and printed study guides were augmented by electronic support mechanisms. Students were able to access their study guides, timetables and assignment tasks online and communicated with their course convener as well as with fellow students via a bulletin board and an internal e-mail system set up for the course. The article reports on the extent to which students used these facilities rather than more conventional modes of communication (fax., telephone, written submission of assignments), on how students managed the set tasks and what difficulties they encountered.

1 Tertiary German studies in the Australian context

As in other English speaking countries (e.g. Lutzeier, 1998), the past decade has seen a shift from students entering tertiary German courses at Australian universities with HSC (Higher School Certificate) qualifications to students with no or very limited knowledge of the language. A large number of these students do not study German as their major subject but combine language study with another degree, for example in Law or Economics. Another change can be seen in the make-up of the student body in terms of age: more and more so-called 'mature age students' (defined as students who do not enter university immediately after achieving their entry qualifications and who are 23 years of age and older) enroll for German courses at tertiary level, in the majority of cases with no or little prior knowledge of the language. Introductory German courses have thus become the courses with the strongest enrolment figures.

Because of work and study commitments, this new type of language student is looking increasingly for more flexible modes of programme delivery in place of the traditional regularly timetabled on campus classes. In 1999, the Department of European Languages at Macquarie University in Sydney introduced German units in flexible delivery mode, i.e. on-campus as well as externally. These units provide students with an introduction to the German language and are based on teaching materials (textbook, workbook, tape programme and CD-ROM) which are communicative in their approach but also provide a thorough grounding in the basic structures of the language and contain material on various aspects of life and culture in German speaking countries (Terrell

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344000000410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

et al., 1996). They have run successfully as on-campus units over the past years (day and evening classes) attracting the highest enrolments in the German programme.

2 Developing an introductory German programme for distance education

The existing on-campus programme has been taught within a time frame of five contact hours per week over thirteen weeks per semester. The introductory units are offered in three stages: Introductory German I in first semester, Introductory German II in second semester and Introductory German III over the long summer vacation. The teaching materials used for the course consist of a textbook which is used in class and a workbook and cassettes with which the students work outside class hours. They are also exposed to short video sections in class and to computer programs written to practise grammar patterns introduced in the course. A commercially produced CD-ROM with revision exercises on grammar and vocabulary is part of the teaching package and students are encouraged to make use of it.

The course follows a communicative approach and consequently there is much student interaction in the classroom. For a large part of class time, students work in pairs or small groups solving information gap exercises, conducting interviews with one another and performing role plays on set tasks.

Student evaluations over a number of years showed the teaching materials used for the on-campus units to be very successful, but to adapt them for teaching by distance mode posed a number of challenges. The teaching package is not designed for self-learning and substantial teacher input is necessary to provide introductions to new areas of vocabulary and grammar and to initiate students' communicative activities. While the cassette programme offers some focus on pronunciation it was not considered sufficient for beginners in a language without additional teacher input. The methodology used with the teaching materials involved much group and pair work activity and it was felt that conventional modes of communication such as telephone, fax and submission of written work were not adequate because they are limited to student-teacher interaction but do not allow for interaction between students.

The materials were therefore amended by a specially produced set of audiocassettes: it provided the students with a guide to the communicative exercises, introducing them to the tasks and providing examples in the form of dialogues. The cassettes also contain a section on pronunciation where external students are provided with ample opportunities to practise their pronunciation of German.

The unit's online facilities were developed in conjunction with the university's Centre for Flexible Learning which provides technical support in the development and running of online courses through WebCT, a World Wide Web course tool developed at the University of British Columbia (Goldberg, Salari and Swoboda, 1996; Goldberg, 1997). WebCT is completely WWW-based and a single web server running the WebCT software is used for course creation as well as course delivery. A range of facilities are available through WebCT which can be grouped according to the following aspects (Goldberg and Salari, 1997):

- Presentation tool: the course designer may determine layout, colour, text, etc. for the course pages;

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- Student tools: communication tools (bulletin board, chat and e-mail), evaluation tools (online automatically marked quizzes and multiple choice questions), areas for student collaboration and presentations (including student homepage generation), a course calendar tool, an image archive, a glossary database and tools for content annotation, indexing and searching;
- Administrative tools: they include, amongst others, the facility to track student access and progress, a categorised question database and on-line quiz-creation tool, a questionnaire delivery and report tool and a grade maintenance and reporting tool.

In this first stage of implementing the unit online, the focus was on using the communication tools offered by WebCT in order to complement the teaching package outlined above. All students enrolling for the unit were entered into the WebCT database and provided with a printed introduction regarding their login and password and the use of diacritics, i.e. the German 'Umlaut'.

The features of WebCT used for the course are:

- *Information button*: here students can see the study-guide for the course including information on assessment, assignments and a detailed programme for each week of the course;
- *Calendar*: this tool highlights due dates for assignments, the on-campus session (one per semester for students in the Greater Sydney Metropolitan area) and two set telephone conversations with their course convener;
- *Bulletin board*: an open forum which can be used for discussion between the students and their course convener as well as amongst the students;
- *Internal mail*: a facility to send private mail amongst students or to the course convener.

3 Computer-mediated communication: first experiences

In its first semester, the course had an enrolment of 53 students who live all over Australia: namely in various parts of New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The group was made-up in part of students enrolled through Macquarie University (27) and in part of students enrolled through 'Open Learning Australia'(26), Australia's tertiary distance education institution. Because of equity issues, it had been decided in advance that using the computer-based tools of the course would not be made compulsory. Nevertheless, nearly half the students enrolled made use of the WebCT facility, albeit with varying degrees of involvement (see Figure 1).

WebCT contains a so called 'student-tracking' facility and with its help it was possible to observe that some students would regularly access the online unit and read messages posted to the bulletin board, but would not send any contributions themselves.

The following account outlines in more detail how students were encouraged to actively participate and what form this participation took. Whereas the internal email tool was meant to be used mainly for the submission of those parts of assignments which were not interactive (e.g. answers to listening comprehension tasks, gap exercises

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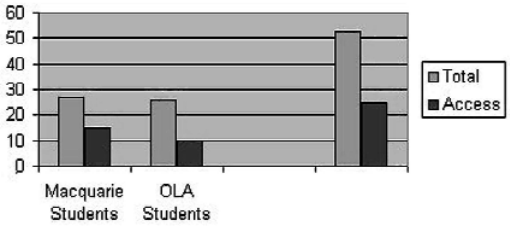


Fig. 1. Students' use of WebCT.

on grammar and vocabulary), students also used it to send requests for information, especially in the beginning stages of the course. They were encouraged to use the bulletin board instead for such requests, as the answers were seen to be of interest to all students. The bulletin board was also used to provide feedback on all parts of the assignments, but its most important contribution to the course lies in its potential for interaction between students.

Students were encouraged from the onset of the course to join the discussion, if this is the right term to use for contributions made by students who only had a few hours of language instruction at this stage. The very first communicative task offered to them was based on the material they had covered in the first week of the course: introducing and describing themselves.

4 The First Task

Guten Tag, ich heiße XX. Ich bin ziemlich [quite, rather] groß. Ich habe mittellanges braunes Haar und blaue Augen. Heute [today] trage ich ein braunes Kleid. Und Sie? Wie heißen Sie? Wie sind Sie? Bitte schreiben Sie!

Whereas one student responded only a few hours after the task was posted, it took a few weeks until more students ventured their answers to the bulletin board as the record of incoming messages below shows. At this early stage students were not all too familiar with the WebCT facilities and some students sent their contributions independently to different threads rather than to the forum *Beschreibungen* which they were meant to use.

First Contact – Task 1

- *Beschreibungen [Forum: Beschreibungen*]
- *3. Unit Convener (Wed, Mar. 10, 1999, 10:54)*
- *5. STUDENT 1 (Wed, Mar. 10, 1999, 14:59)*
- *6. Unit Convener (Wed, Mar. 10, 1999, 17:28)*
- *7. STUDENT 2 (Mon, Mar. 15, 1999, 12:29)*
- *8. Unit Convener (Mon, Mar. 15, 1999, 12:32)*
- *29. STUDENT 3 (Tue, Mar. 23, 1999, 16:12)*
- *38. Unit Convener (Sat, Mar. 27, 1999, 15:49)*
- *55. STUDENT 4 (Tue, Apr. 6, 1999, 21:24)*
- *56. Unit Convener (Wed, Apr. 7, 1999, 11:37)*

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- *58. STUDENT 5 (Tue, Apr. 13, 1999, 19:13)*
- *59. Unit Convener (Wed, Apr. 14, 1999, 18:19)*
- *60. STUDENT 6 (Thu, Apr. 15, 1999, 09:57)*

Students' answers varied to a large degree regarding planning, fluency and correctness. The following two samples should illustrate this point. Sample 1 is from the student who immediately responded to the task:

Sample Answer 1
Guten Tag! Ich heiße XX. Ich habe langes, schwartzes Haar und braune Augen. Ich trage eines gelb Hemd, eine Kwawatte (mit"Bugs Bunny!"), schwartzes Hose und schuhe. Ich bin groß,und schlanke. Ich bin sehr alt - neunundzwanzig! ;-)Mach's gut!

Sample 2 came to the bulletin board about four weeks later.

Sample Answer 2
Hallo zu jedermann! Ich heiße S. C.. Ich bin dreiund vierzig Jahre alt (Ich stelle einen Rekord auf?) Ich wohne in R. und ich arbeite bei T. Natürlich bin ich auch ein Student. Ich spreche ein bißchen Deutsch und Russisch, und ich studiere beide Sprachen auf Macquarie. Alles gute!

All contributions were positively acknowledged by the course convener and at this early stage (i.e. the first task) no error correction was offered, because it was felt that it would discourage rather than encourage students to send further contributions. Focus on form, however, was introduced by the students themselves with requests for information as in the following example:

Sample request for information
Hallo, In the table on page 40, the form 'ein' is used for the masculine indefinite article (ein Buch, ein Stift), but in Übung 3 (and other places as well, I think) it uses 'einen' (einen Tisch, einen Rock). Why the difference? Is there a distinction I am missing? X.X. Ach! Schauen Sie an die Ühr!!

Guten Morgen, X.X, 'ein' is the masculine singular form in the nominative case – a form we use for the subject of a sentence, the 'actor' so to speak. 'einen' is the form in the accusative case – we use this form for the direct object of a sentence. We will start discussing the German case system in chapter 2. Bis bald, CC

Questions of this kind were answered by the course convener to a depth that was considered appropriate for the current level, i.e. the explanations were not as detailed as they might have been unless a grammatical feature had already been discussed in the teaching materials or was about to be discussed fairly soon. About six weeks into the course, as part of their third assignment, some students chose to do a communicative task on the bulletin board rather than a short essay question. The task revolved around daily activities and the following is a realisation of it by two students over a period of two days:

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Communicative task (3. Assignment: 19–21April)
Guten Tag XX! Wie geht's?Was machst du gern? Wo arbeitest du? Wie viele geschwister hast du? Wann steht du auf?

Guten Tag YY! Ich bin sehr gut, danke! und du? Ich höre Musik gern und tanze! Ich bin Lehrerin. Ich habe keine Geschwister! Ich stehe um halb seiben Uhr auf!!! und du? Wo arebeitest du? Wie sieht du? Wo wohnst du? Wie alt bist du? Wie viele Geschwister hast du?

Hallo XX, mir geht es gut (aber ich bin verrückt...) Ach, ich höre Musik auch gern, aber ich tanze nicht gern. Ich arbeite in Lucent Technologies. Ich bin groß und schlank, und ich habe langes schwarzes Haar und braune Augen. Ich wohne in Artarmon. Ich bin 29 Jahre alt. Ich habe zwei bruder. Sie heißen Craig und Scott. Beschreiben Sie ihren Tagesblauf. Wann studiert du Deutche? Was machst du sonntags?

Ich stehe um halb sieben auf. Ich dusche und frühstücke. Um acht Uhr morgens, Ich gehe zur Arbeit. Montags habe ich Deustche um sieben Uhr. Ich habe Musik freitags um neun Uhr. Um sonntags, ich besuche meine Freundinnen! Und du? Was machst du wochenende? Beschreiben Sie ihren Tagesblauf.

Ich stehe um 7 Uhr auf. Ich dusche und frühstücke und geht zur Arbeit um neun Uhr. Ich spielt Karten um viertel vor eins. Ich habe Informatik montags um sechs Uhr, und mittwochs um sieben Uhr. Ich studiert am samstag Deutche und Informatik. Ich speilt am sonstag Kontrabaß. Tschüs!

While the students were still working on the task there was no comment and no error feedback by the course convener. When the task was finished a summative evaluation was given which focused in particular on errors in those areas of grammar and vocabulary which had already been introduced in the teaching materials.

Error Feedback (Sample)
Liebe XX, lieber YY, gute Arbeit!! Well done!You did very well in the communicative task – you might want to try a chat room for one of the later ones.

Here is a bit of feedback on some points of grammar: There were a few 'problems' with verb endings, please look again at: 'wann stehSt du auf?; wie siehSt du AUS (separable verb); wann studierSt du? ich... gehE zur Arbeit; ich studierE; ich spielE – look at the feedback for assignment 2 for a list of verb endings; it's crucial that you learn those
'ich bin sehr gut' means that you think of yourself as a terrific person; if you want to say that you are well:"mir geht es sehr gut"
'gern' needs to follow the verb immediately: "ich höre GERN Musik"; "ich höre AUCH GERN Musik"
"um sieben Uhr" is correct; but "um halb sieben" (no 'Uhr').
Note: der Bruder, zwei Brüder
Deutsch

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Was machst du am Wochenende? Am Wochenende besuche ich Freundinnen.
Note that the finite/conjugated verbform (the one which agrees with the subject of the action) is always in second position. There is no comma between the first and second position in the sentence, see: "Um acht Uhr morgens gehe ich zur Arbeit".
"Sonntags besuche ich meine Freundinnen."
Tschüs, bis morgen, CC

5 Discussion

Those students who used the computer-mediated communication facilities gave positive reports in a questionnaire distributed in the second half of the semester and in a discussion about it during the on-campus session. A small number of students were not very experienced in the use of computers in general and felt therefore a little inhibited in contributing to the bulletin board. A section of the on-campus session was set aside to provide advice and practice in the department's multimedia room, but only students attending the session could profit. When running the course again, more support might have to be given to students with little computer experience. The problems which occurred (mainly switching the settings from English to German) will be collated as FAQ and added to the unit's entry page in the form of a separate button.

The contributions which the students produce are seen as a form of language which lies between the written and the spoken. The medium which is used is certainly written language but the mode resembles the spoken language (cf. McCarthy, 1993) which is in keeping with the tasks the students were working on. Correspondingly, error feedback has been given only when students completed their tasks fully so as not to interrupt their contributions which may have stretched over a few days. Rather than feedback on each single error, summative feedback was given in order not to discourage students from communicating with each other.

With the growing length and complexity of students' assignments the time needed for feedback increased correspondingly. In order to provide adequate feedback to all students, a general evaluation of the set tasks was sent to the bulletin board and additional individual comments were sent to the students by internal email, making use of a 'quote' function within WebCT, with which it is possible to edit the student's original text. For the next running of the course, it is planned to split up the assignments into those parts with simple short answers or multiple choice answers (e.g. listening comprehension tasks or gap exercises on grammar) and those components with more elaborate answers. The former will be incorporated into quizzes which can be generated through WebCT. The 'quiz' facility will allow for instant evaluation of students' contributions and thus free up more of the course convener's time for detailed feedback on more elaborate contributions in the form of short essay questions and communicative tasks carried out between the students.

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WebCT Homepage http://www.webct.com/

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