

Flexibility and Personalization of German Instruction through the Internet and Skype

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Teaching using online materials and Skype allows for great flexibility in scheduling, duration of the instructional lessons, and structure and design of the lessons. In this presentation I will discuss the procedures and materials that I use to develop and design such instructional lessons. Personalized instruction or “instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners “ (NETP 2010, p. 12) allows the student and instructor to design a course that fits the needs of the individual student. I will also discuss certain language skills described in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts that should be applied to world language learning and the National Education Technology Plan of 2010 that points the way toward a more flexible and individualized style of teaching.

Student evaluation

In order to personalize instruction for a student, the instructor needs to obtain a very accurate analysis of the needs, desires, and skills of the student. As an independent consultant, students contact me generally through the Internet to set up an instructional program. I offer a free introductory session that may last up to an hour to allow me to determine if the student and I feel we can work together and for me to obtain a general impression of the student’s skill level in pronunciation, grammar knowledge, speaking and understanding, and also the goals and desires of the student for the instructional program. I then work with the student to obtain a more detailed analysis of the student’s skills at the approximate level of the student. If the student has just a little background in German, I will have the student read five short sentences that contain all the problematic sounds so that I can determine if there are specific sounds that the student does not read correctly – these sounds will be worked on with the student in the early lessons. As most of the students with whom I have worked want to be able to speak German, good pronunciation is an important element in a student’s instructional program whether the student is just beginning to learn German or is a more advanced student – as an aside note, it is very much harder to correct pronunciation problems for students who are more advanced and have never fully perfected good pronunciation than to work with beginning students and teach and demand good pronunciation from the very start of instruction. In addition to an analysis of a student’s pronunciation, I want to know what areas of grammar the student has mastered and where there

are weaknesses. To determine this information I ask all students except the very beginning students to complete a one-to-two-page exam at the level the student has indicated and send that exam to me before our actual first lesson. The first level exam or grammar analysis covers the material that is presented in the first level online course. It is used at the beginning of a student's work for beginning students to determine if the student might have some background in German and also later at the end of the level to see if there are areas that still need review as the student moves to the second level. The second level grammar analysis would verify mastery of material for the second level and the third level exam checks mastery of third level material. I use these in two ways: with a new tutee I often ask the student to complete more than one of the grammar analyses, so that I can verify what grammar material should be covered in that student's lessons – if I have been working with a student sufficiently long that he/she has completed the material for one of the levels, then I use the grammar analysis at the end of that level to verify mastery of the covered material and to determine what areas still need review and further practice as the student moves to the next level and this review is then incorporated into the design of future lessons.

In the initial interview I will also analyze the students spoken output to find out what sentence structures the student has mastered and where more work is needed. The spoken analysis varies depending of the background of the student – students with a more developed background will be asked more questions to determine at what level the student begins to have difficulty and whether speaking skills match written grammar knowledge. It is interesting to note that while students may do well on the written grammar analyses when they have time to think through what they want to write, they may have more difficulty with spontaneous spoken German which allows no time to carefully think through an answer, so that problem areas of grammar will show up as areas where correct usage is not fully incorporated into automatic speech production.

After a student has worked through a significant number of lessons, review of previously learned grammar and vocabulary should become an integral part of the student's lessons. This review can be done in a cyclic design of the lessons or whenever the instructor notices that the student is not employing some previously learned material correctly. The amount and frequency of such review depends on the effectiveness of the initial lessons and the diligence of the student in learning the material well the first time. In the more formal setting of the high school, I required students entering a succeeding level to complete a grammar analysis of the material in the previous level. Based on each student's responses I designed an individualized review program using the computer practice materials that are now available online. Thus each student's review would require work on just those areas of previously learned material that the student had not mastered completely. In the tutorial setting when a student finishes a level, I request the student to complete a grammar analysis on the completed material and I then incorporate review into the ongoing lessons for those areas where the student is less strong.

If a student is more advanced and wants to work on developing writing skills, then I ask for a writing sample of 200-300 words in German to look for syntax, grammar, spelling, and essay construction. When I was teaching at the high school level, I did not require full essays until the fourth level, since I figured that students would learn paragraph and essay structure through their English course. By the time the student had reach the fourth level, he/she had learned the major elements of grammar and syntax and could then produce good essays using good grammar and

syntax. With adult students I need to determine how soon in the course program to begin having students start writing paragraphs and then essays and that depends on the desires of the student.

All of the information concerning student goals, language skills, and interests is necessary in order to personalize the instructional program for students you are tutoring. At the high school level I worked hard to know the skill level of the student, but I had a fairly well defined curriculum to present and could not tailor lessons to interests of the students beyond such areas as individually selected review materials of previously presented materials and choice and difficulty level of reading and listening materials – one of my goals at the more advanced levels was to have students read and listen for a number of minutes with material that they could understand rather than have everyone go through the same reading and listening materials. When I work with tutored students, several more elements can be considered in the design of the lessons:

Another type of information that I collect from my tutored students is a reevaluation of the student's program after a significant period of time. I want to find out if the student's goals have changed, what elements in the current program are good and helpful and what are not so helpful, what procedures or activities are missing, what elements of the program could be done more often, and, generally, how satisfied the student is with the program and what can be done to improve the student's level of satisfaction.

The personalized lessons

The next major element in the design of a student's personalized tutorial program is to structure the actual lessons. The student and the instructor determine the length and the frequency of the lessons. I have worked with students in various length lessons and have found that a one-hour lesson works well for most students. As most of the students with whom I now work also have a regular job, lesson frequency varies from two times per week to once every two weeks. I do not think that lessons less often than every two weeks are often enough to continue to develop the language skills. As the instructor begins to work with the student, other lesson design features will become apparent. For example, one student may be very good at working independently through an assignment before meeting with the instructor on Skype. This student is able to read and understand the new grammar explanations and then complete the written exercises and check the answers with the answers provided in each lesson syllabus. For this student actual Skype lesson time is spent in the development of the student's speaking skill and in answering any specific questions on the new grammar material. While another student may want to have the instructor clarify the grammar explanation further and the work through some of the written exercises with the instructor during the Skype session. In some cases the student's questions stem from a lack of understanding of the meta-terminology used in the explanations whether these are in the language under study or in English. Therefore, many of the lessons in the early levels also refer to chapters in a book on English grammar ('English Grammar for Students of German') to provide further support for understanding the new grammar elements. Improving the student's grammar skills forms the foundation for the development of the student's speaking, listening and understanding abilities, so each lesson contains some work on grammar, but also practice speaking using materials the student read or heard prior to the Skype lesson. Excellent additional practice is also available through the online java-based 'Grammar and Vocabulary

practice exercises'. For many of the major grammar topics these computer-based practice exercises provide more than one exercise on a topic and these exercises are sequenced so that the later exercises on the topic become more difficult. It is important to note that the vocabulary used in the computer exercises is always drawn from vocabulary that the students have learned through the vocabulary units up to that point and these vocabulary words were selected because of their high frequency of usage [see End Note].

The development of the student's speaking skill is usually an important student goal. Since it is important to me that my students feel comfortable and understand well, I work to develop the student's speaking skill through a gradual movement from the use of English to the language under study in both the Skype lessons and in the online materials. I have found that students who have learned new vocabulary (including the noun genders and the verb conjugations) and grammar well through the use of the online materials and computer practice materials consistently improve their speaking and understanding of the new language because they understand how sentences are constructed and they have the tools to put new sentences together. For tutored students with little or no previous background or for those who have pronunciation errors, the early Skype sessions deal with how to make certain new sounds and how to read various letter combinations with the proper pronunciation. The next stage is to practice the various sentence/question structures that the students have learned early in the first level. This often takes the form of the instructor asking the student questions about his/her activities during the Skype lesson. The students are also encouraged to obtain a beginning reader with very short and nicely illustrated stories that provide new vocabulary and a set of short factual questions on each story. These are also used during the Skype lessons to elicit practice speaking by the student. Somewhat longer and more detailed reading pieces are provided in the online lessons toward the end of the first level. I recommend a reader for the second level for reading and speaking practice that is constructed to provide gradually more complex and longer material. With tutored students I ask questions about the stories read and then introduce the concept of retelling a story (defined in detail online in Level 2) where the student prepares notes on one of the stories and then tells that story in his/her own words. For this activity I stress that student should not write out and memorize what the student wants to say; rather the student should read the story more than once, make short notes on the content and new vocabulary or grammar items, and then practice producing sentences from the student's notes that tell the story. This kind of practice encourages the development of spontaneous speech.

By the time students reach the third level the explanatory material in each of the online lessons is almost entirely in German and the entire Skype lessons are conducted in German. Reading selections are usually based on material of interest to the student – one student wanted to read Harry Potter in German - and still provide a solid basis for retelling; but now the retelling is usually several minutes in length rather than one or two minutes as in Level 2. Speaking now also focuses a great deal on the activities of the student and at the same time new vocabulary, complex and varied sentence structure, use of past and future tenses for relating events in the student's life are encouraged. As the

student progresses through Level 3 into Level 4 the focus of the language program gradually shifts from learning elements of the language to using the language in various ways. In the online materials levels one through three contain a well-defined curriculum, whereas the Level 4 material is not structured into lessons. The student that I had in the high school program, were strongly encouraged to begin to design an individualized learning program rather than relying on the instructor to lay out what the student should be learning. This new curriculum design was in keeping with my philosophy that the student should be given some experience in planning a personal learning plan as a way to encourage life-long-learning. In the tutorial program, the student and the instructor work together from the initial lessons to design a program that meets the needs and desires of the student.

Another element of the personalized lesson design is the development of a student's listening skill. At the beginning level I work with simple questions about the student and have the student provide the answers. Then I work with some of the easy reading materials – either online materials or actual books - and question students on these materials. I also will read stories to a student in the Skype lesson and then discuss the story with the student; these stories are usually short and have some kind of interesting twist to them. During the Skype lesson I may read a short story to the student who does not see the text; I might first read the story and then find out if there are aspects of the story that the student does not understand, then I explain these elements or rephrase that section of the story and then reread the story for the student. Listening materials are available online also; Deutsche Welle, for example, has a large variety of available listening materials at many levels of difficulty. In my high school program beyond the 2nd level, students could often use the listening material from the in-class library of varied listening materials on CD's or DVD's. If the student is listening to materials that are a bit difficult for that student, I encourage the student to first listen one or more times while reading the text version of the listening passage. Sometimes the student should look up new words in the text and then listen again with the text available but not followed in detail. Finally, the student should listen again to the passage without using the text. As students reach the more advanced levels, the Skype lessons and the online materials will all be in the target language, thus the student will obtain further listening practice during the lesson.

As an instructor with many years of teaching experience, I find it challenging and fun to work with a new student, find out what the student knows and what that student's goals are, and then to design a flexible learning program that is personalized for that student.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy

The Common Core State Standards have been adopted by many sites and some of the 'Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy' have direct relevancy to the teaching of world languages. With the attention to individual needs that this personalized tutorial program provides, the 'Language Progressive Skills' described in the Common Core State Standards for English

Language Arts are automatically and continually considered in carrying out the tutorial program. [See the complete chart page 30 of the full paper].

The following list of items are quoted from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy, but they are just as appropriate for world language learners:

“Language Progressive Skills, by Grade

The following skills, marked with an asterisk (*) in Language standards 1–3 [*see originals*], are particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades as they are applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking.

L.3.1f. Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement.

L.3.3a. Choose words and phrases for effect.

L.4.1f. Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.

L.4.1g. Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., *to/too/two; there/their*).

L.4.3a. Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.

L.4.3b. Choose punctuation for effect.

L.5.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb tense.

L.5.2a. Use punctuation to separate items in a series.

L.6.1c. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in pronoun number and person.

L.6.1d. Recognize and correct vague pronouns (i.e., ones with unclear or ambiguous antecedents).

L.6.1e. Recognize variations from standard English in their own and others’ writing and speaking, and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language.

L.6.2a. Use punctuation (commas, parentheses, dashes) to set off nonrestrictive/parenthetical elements.

L.6.3a. Vary sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.

L.6.3b. Maintain consistency in style and tone.

L.7.1c. Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.

L.7.3a. Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.

L.8.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood.

L.9–10.1a. Use parallel structure.” (Common Core State Standards p. 30)

National Education Technology Plan – 2010

In a recent paper (“Tutoring Students Online via Skype Typifies Use of New Standards”) I discussed another important plan of action for the use of technology in education:

the National Education Technology Plan – 2010 in which several concepts are mentioned that apply directly to a ‘personalized’ tutorial program:

Same lesson for all

“...In a time when we have the capability to support learning 24/7 and personalize the way a student interacts with digital content, it no longer makes sense to give every 13-year-old the same set of 45-minute American history lessons.” (NETP p. 68)

Through tutoring via Skype with online materials, one can indeed support 24/7 learning and personalize the instruction to fit the needs of the tutee.

A multi-level class also allows for personalized instruction.

Time-based or seat-time measures of educational attainment

“Time-based measures were appropriate in their day, but they are not now when we know more about how people learn and we have access to technology that can help us accommodate different styles and paces of learning. As we move to online learning and learning that combines classroom and online learning, time-based measures will increasingly frustrate our attempts to provide learning experiences that lead to achievement and the pursuit of postsecondary education that our modern world requires.” (NETP p. 68)

If the class is time constrained, then in multi-level classes where technology is abundantly available, students can be allowed and encouraged to achieve more if they have already mastered the ‘required’ course work and given extra credit for that work, i.e. such as doing substantially more work to prepare for the AP exam in German. In the tutorial program described here, completion and mastery of the course work is the goal and is not limited by ‘time-based’ measures.

Same classroom for a year

“Another basic assumption is the inflexible way we organize students into age-determined groups, structure separate academic disciplines, organize learning into classes of roughly equal size with all the students in a particular class receiving the same content at the same pace, and keep these groups in place all year.” (NETP p.68-69)

This assumption does not apply to a tutorial program where one sees students individually. Even in multi-level classes as I had, I did have the same students for the same time period, but composition of the class was not age-determined, the content and pacing of the class was quite different for many students.

Online Learning

“...Our education system should leverage students’ interest in technology and the time they currently spend learning informally outside the regular school hours to extend learning time in a way that motivates them even more.

One way to do that is through online learning, which allows schools to extend learning time by providing students with learning on demand anytime and anywhere, dramatically expanding educational opportunities without increasing time spent in school....” (NETP p. 71)

This concept is the heart of a successful 24/7 online tutorial program as described in this paper. This very idea was even proposed over 15 years ago in “The Future of German in American Education - Summary Report, July 1996” which delineates quite clearly how the use of technology in language instruction can greatly modify the structure of the course and even support courses where there otherwise might not be any:

“Consider technology not merely as an optional add-on but as potentially reshaping the entire language learning construct (e.g., individualized, student-centered learning, access to on-line information, task-based learning, linked learning with native speakers of German, distance learning in areas where German programs can otherwise not be supported, language maintenance, specialized programs)” (Byrnes, 1996, p. 6).

“...Exploit the Flexibility and Power of Technology...”

The always-on nature of the Internet and mobile access devices provides our education system with the opportunity to create learning experiences that are available anytime and anywhere....” (NETP p.23)

The personalized tutorial program is most effective in a 24/7 environment and through the Internet.

“...Assuming that we have standards for the competencies students must have and valid, reliable techniques for measuring these competencies, technology can help us assess (and reward) learning regardless of when and where it takes place.” (NETP p. 28)

Particularly in a multi-level classroom technology can allow us to assess student progress and allow the student to progress when they have master and completed the course work whether the work was done in a classroom or in other places. For the tutorial program technology is essential for the progress of the student wherever he or she is.

”There is a difference between using assessments to determine what students have learned for grading and accountability purposes (summative uses) and using assessments to diagnose and modify the conditions of learning and instruction (formative uses)....” (NETP p. 28)

In the multi-level classroom the summative use of assessment is necessary to provide grades, but assessment through technology can also allow the student to see how well he/she is doing and often times continue to work with the new material and redo the assessment activity until the student obtains the level of achievement that he/she wishes. In the tutorial program assessment is mostly formative in nature.

“3.3 Use technology to provide all learners with online access to effective teaching and better learning opportunities and options in places where they are not otherwise available and in blended (online and offline) learning environments.” (NETP p. 49)

As I mentioned at the start of the paper, I have been tutoring students in places where there was no course available, or the courses that were available were not appropriate for the student.

Last Words

In terms of providing tutorial instruction anytime and anywhere that is personalized to the needs and goals of each student, an online tutorial program using Skype admirably meets this expectation. It is critical in such a program, however, to very carefully and fully evaluate the skills, needs, and goals of the student during the initial contact with the student. The lesson design and structure will have a much larger student input component than in a regular classroom course and several elements from new sets of standards and technology guidelines provide a strong theoretical background for the development of the student lessons. However, such a program requires significant time for each student. At a rate of one hour per student per week, a regular teacher could work with 25 to 30 students per week. I do not believe that this would be practical for most situations, but my experience during my last years as a full-time teacher and working through Skype and the Internet since then indicates that many students can learn very well in an individualized, differentiated, and personalized program with less contact time with a teacher than in a regular high school class. What I have described here is a way for students with an incomplete background in the language or students who wish to progress at their own pace to receive the specific materials and directions they need to learn well.

End Note: [From World Language Tutoring via Skype and Online Materials p.3]

“The very extensive ‘Online German Materials’ that students may use are an essential element in the success of this type of tutorial program. Such an extensive online instructional program is essential because the instructor does not have time to build new learning materials for each student who is tutored. It is a sufficient challenge to select among the available materials to sequence the items of most use to this student. The three levels of the online instructional program on Morrey’s website each have 10 lesson syllabi which define what vocabulary lists to learn for that lesson and present written explanations of new grammar items with a few written exercises to practice the new grammar items; answers for each written exercise are provided on the lesson syllabus page. In addition to the written exercises, the computer practice programs – available online as the ‘java-based practice programs’ - for each level provide more extensive practice of the new grammar elements and use only vocabulary that has been presented up to that point in the sequence of levels¹. In the case of the more difficult grammar concepts several computer practice programs are usually provided that are sequenced from easier to more complex. Also included in each three-to-four-week lesson are listening, speaking, and reading activities with suggested sources and/or links to additional online resources for these activities. At the beginning of Level 1 there are also several steps a student needs to complete to establish good pronunciation of German. Beyond Level 3 there are no developed syllabi, but there are still new grammar explanations and coordinated computer practice programs and extensive vocabulary lists. Students who are working beyond the third level often have very different backgrounds, skill sets, and goals, and I have encouraged them to develop a personal learning plan rather than presenting them with a pre-determined curriculum – see the German 4 curriculum on the online website under ‘German Courses – past and present’.

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The ‘Vocabulary and Grammar practice exercises’ are computer-based practice exercises that are divided into individual units with each unit focusing on a particular grammar topic or vocabulary list. In the Level 1 materials there are 20 vocabulary units containing about 700 words selected mostly from the “Basic German Dictionary-Grammar – A Dictionary containing the 2500 most commonly used words ...” (by EMC Corporation, published in 1973), and 69 other units containing 2263 additional individual practice items. In the Level 2 computer materials there are 20 vocabulary units with about 840 frequency-based words, 50 additional grammar practice units with 1945 individual items. Level 3 contains 750 words in 20 units and 40 additional practice units containing 1710 practice items. Level 4 currently contains 3680 individual items of grammar and vocabulary including an additional 500+ frequency-based items. In total there are now about 11750 computer-based practice items for the students to master. ‘ ‘

References:

“Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C., 2010)

"*English Grammar for Students of German*" [ISBN: 0-934034-31-1] or [ISBN: 0-934034-14-1] (Zorach and Melin, The Olivia and Hill Press).

“National Educational Technology Standards for Students”, Second Edition (International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 2007) – see: <http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/nets-s-standards.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

“The Future of German in American Education - Summary Report, July 1996” (Byrnes, Heidi, Georgetown University, AATG Newsletter, Vol. 32, No.1 pp 4-8)

“Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology” (NETP or the National Education Technology Plan 2010, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, November, 2010)

The current website that I use contains a text copy of this presentation and of two other recent presentations dealing with online tutoring. Also on the same website are the texts of two presentations at the Northeast Conference in 2005 and one at the National Education Computing Conference in 2000 that provide a much more detailed description of the use of an Internet-based instructional program for high school students; they are located at: <http://morreys-language.com> under Conference presentations.

“Tutoring Students Online via Skype Typifies Use of New Standards”

Presented at the Foreign Language Association of Northern California Conference, Hayward, California, October 26, 2013.

"World Language Tutoring via Skype and Online Materials"

Presented at the California League of Middle Schools, the California League of High Schools and the National High School Association Conference, Monterey California, January 12, 2013.

“What it takes to Teach German Mostly via the Internet”

This presentation describes the changes in student learning skills, instructional practices, and administrative procedures that are needed to develop the successful on-line German program that Dr. Morrey conducted for high school students in levels 1-5 from 2001 through 2005.

Presented at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Language, New York City, April, 2005.

"Technology Plus the Internet to Redesign Advanced HS German Classes"

This presentation outlines the procedures needed to begin to convert a traditional high school class to one that has much if not all of the content available on the Internet and lists a variety of reading and listening materials that are effective with advanced students.

Presented at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Language, New York City, April, 2005.

"Change The Traditional High School World Language Classroom Through Technology"

This presentation describes how students from first to advanced levels can use technology and other resources to break the one-year, one-level classroom structure.

Presented at the National Education Computing Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, June 28, 2000.