



## »Ich will Deutsch lernen« - A Learning Portal for Second Language and Literacy Acquisition in Heterogeneous Classes

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### Abstract

»Ich will Deutsch lernen« (*I want to learn German*) is the name of a new learning portal developed by Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (German Adult Education Association) which was launched in August 2013. The portal provides a wide range of learning opportunities with regard to different language levels, topics and specific learning needs. It encompasses a total of more than 11,500 exercises in five main language courses: German A1, A2 and B1, German on the Job, and A1+ABC as a combined course of German A1 and literacy training. Thanks to the support from the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF) the use is completely free of charge for learners and teachers alike. The portal won the Comenius EduMedia Award in June 2015.

The platform provides a digital German course for low- and non-literates that can be used in heterogeneous classes and by independent learners alike. An innovative feature of »Ich will Deutsch lernen« is the combined teaching of oral and written skills that can be adapted to the individual needs of learners.

This paper argues why there is a need for this kind of material and introduces the concept of the portal with an emphasis on the A1+ABC combined language and literacy course of the programme. Parts of this paper have been published by its author Celia Sokolowsky in the volume "Adult literacy, second language and cognition" [1].

### 1. Introduction

»Ich will Deutsch lernen« [2] is designed to support the acquisition of German as a second language. It is directed at participants in integration courses, other language courses and literacy training in the field of adult education as well as to those immigrants who – due to legal, financial or personal reasons – learn independently. The portal focusses on language course levels A1 to B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [3]. Its courses, chapters and learning units are designed around the description model for the CEFR's communicative competences and the curriculum framework for integration courses, as developed by the German National Agency for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*) [4].

In developing the literacy learning material, we started with the basic assumption that second language (L2) literacy training is inseparably linked to L2 acquisition. The learning material for non- or semi-literate users of the portal has therefore been conceptualized as a German language course focusing on oral skills with additional literacy training in L2 German. Another principal aim of »Ich will Deutsch lernen« is to provide a means of helping teachers deal with the pre-existing heterogeneity of German as a second language (GSL) and literacy classes. The non-linear structure of an internet platform supports the idea of combining learning materials at different levels while focusing the class on a common topic.

### 2. Approach and concept of »Ich will Deutsch lernen«

The curriculum framework for integration courses defines so-called 'fields of communicative action' which summarize the required communicative competences and learning goals for levels A1, A2 and B1 as set out in the CEFR's descriptors. These fields of communicative action include work, education, housing, health, shopping, mobility and other fundamental issues of everyday life. They underscore the contents and learning goals of the 45 chapters spanning the A1, A2 and B1 level language courses that comprise the core of the »Ich will Deutsch lernen« programme. These chapters are inter-connected, not only by a grammatical-lexical progression but also by a narrative that is related through 45 episodes of an online, German-for-beginners level soap-opera.

#### 2.1 A soap opera as the reference for communicative action, lexis & grammar

Each of the 45 videos is used to introduce the learner to a field of communicative action as well as to deliver an introduction to new lexical and grammatical structures. The videos are placed at the

beginning of each chapter, with the assumption that they can be widely understood by L2 learners. Each video is about five minutes long and depicts an episode in the life of a cast of nine protagonists who are struggling - more or less successfully – to find a new job with a secure income, love and a happy family life. They also encounter minor challenges such as passing the German citizenship exam, correctly understanding the doctor’s diagnosis and talking to the teacher about their 15 year old daughter’s grades and behaviour.



Fig. 1: Protagonists of the online soap (Michalis, Niki, Elena) on the welcome page of the portal.

The protagonists in the film series represent different generations, national origins, personal situations, problems and interests. By mastering the challenges of everyday life in Germany (not just communicative ones), they offer a template for the learner, who can compare his or her own experiences with the characters in the film. Despite the happy endings, life is not a “bowl of cherries” in the soap: sometimes communication fails, and it takes strenuous efforts to overcome misunderstandings and difficulties. While every episode can be watched and understood independently, several plots develop over the 45 episodes and motivate the learner to continue working with the material.

These videos are the starting point for each chapter, and they act as the central reference for exercises in which the language is perfected. At level A1, they provide the introduction for all learners, whether or not they have literacy training needs: in other words, all A1-level learners work from the same videos and dialogue but receive different exercises relating to this material. The exercises are based on the lexical and grammatical structures that are implicitly presented in the dialogic texts of the video episodes.



Fig. 2: Parallel pathways for learners of German courses A1+ABC (literacy) and A1

## 2.2 Promoting oral competencies

The A1+ABC course of »Ich will Deutsch lernen« provides learners with a vast amount of exercises and differentiated opportunities to improve their reading and writing skills. At the same time, the



programme aims to stretch literacy learners' oral skills in order to develop their spoken German and secure their progression at an A1 level. The primary aim here is to develop an (oral) functional basic vocabulary and a set of formulaic expressions and routines.

Formulaic language plays a key role in second language acquisition because of its high pragmatic and social value. Routines and formulaic expressions facilitate social contacts in the L2, signal affiliation with the community of L2-speakers and establish a basic capacity to act in the L2. The recourse on formulaic language is bound up with a quick cognitive processing of language, the basis of fluency in language production [5].

In order to improve oral proficiency, exercises focus on listening and understanding, oral repetition of phrases and pattern drill as well as communicative tasks like speaking a message on an answering machine. This concept is based on the idea that learning in chunks helps students not only to make rapid progress in oral proficiency at A1 level but also to obtain a sense of control and confidence in mastering the L2. Based on these skills, the learners' awareness can be focused on L2 structures to achieve a deeper understanding of phenomena and transferability [6].

Oral proficiency in German is central to the social integration of migrants for nearly all everyday activities and is even more important in the case of students whose reading and writing skills need more time to develop. Moreover, non- and semi-literate people require verbal strategies to compensate for their deficiencies and to seek assistance when confronted with written information or tasks they cannot master. The oral A1 course in the portal is designed to address the verbal challenges of everyday life and therefore includes strategies to request re-phrasing, repetition and other forms of support.

## 2.3 Differentiated learning opportunities for heterogeneous L2 literacy classes

Integration courses are generally heterogeneous with regard to the participants' first language, age, gender and other characteristics. This applies even more to GSL classes that include literacy training where some participants have never been to school, while others will have already acquired some literacy skills but are still struggling with the Roman alphabet. In every respect it is necessary to provide strongly differentiated pathways to meet individual learner needs. At the same time, teachers face the challenge of keeping their student groups together and initiating shared and cooperative learning.

Learning material designed for L2 literacy training not only has to address heterogeneity but also the fact that the course has two main objectives and progressions: learning German and developing literacy skills. Printed textbooks for these classes have a common problem: their authors make the assumption that all students start their language and literacy courses with no previous knowledge and follow identical, idealised progressions for acquiring German language and reading/writing skills. Teachers must, therefore, still devote considerable energy to adapting textbooks to students' particular needs and developing their own materials with and for their students.

In the portal »Ich will Deutsch lernen«, the oral German course is supported by a parallel literacy training facility, comprising 3,750 exercises for differentiated work in heterogeneous groups. For each of the fifteen A1 chapters 250 exercises at five different levels are provided in order to give the learners enough material to develop their reading and writing skills, linked to the topic and content of the respective chapter. The learning units proceed from the comprehension of graphemes and phonemes in German to vocabulary building, grammar exercises and the reading and writing of short texts. The five levels represent the content and learning goals as defined in the *Konzept für einen bundesweiten Alphabetisierungskurs* [7], the specific federal concept for L2 literacy courses in Germany.

Learners and teachers may freely combine any of the first to fifth level literacy exercise with the oral exercises in the A1 chapter. The overall topic of the respective chapter provides coherence to the content of the individual elements.

Joint progressing in the A1 language course and working on the same topic maintains the integrity of the class despite these differentiated levels in literacy training. The videos create a framework for shared, mutually-supportive learning in the classroom, prompting questions and discussions among students, providing a spur for communicative activities and role-play and opportunities for projects and sharing personal experiences. During individual activity periods, the class is split up and each student can tackle any of the 350 exercises in each chapter that fits his/her personal needs.

This differentiation is not limited to different sets of exercises but also extends to an individual learner's pace in completing the exercises. Working individually at the computer, the learner determines his/her own tempo and also decides by him/herself whether or not to repeat a recording, exercise or the whole learning unit. Automated feedback in the great majority of the exercises not only helps to control the outcomes but also speeds up learning processes as it immediately confirms or

rejects the learner's assumptions. The rapid correction of errors supports learning and encourages learner autonomy. It also helps to maintain the momentum of learning outside the classroom and after the course has ended.

### 3. Conclusion

»Ich will Deutsch lernen« is designed as a tool for heterogeneous GSL classes that may include non- or semi-literate learners who, in addition to learning the German language, need to improve their reading and writing skills. Unlike printed textbooks, the portal's non-linear structure and the considerable amount of material it contains create a platform where highly individualized learning can be successfully delivered: this fully acknowledges the varying needs and pace of heterogeneous classes, without compromising the benefits arising from their team spirit.

Because learning needs can be addressed individually and learning processes are being progressed through the platform, a positive effect on the general motivation of learners is very likely. Recent student and teacher feedback indicates that participants in literacy courses need special assistance in gaining familiarity with computer-assisted learning and mastering an internet-based portal. But it is also evident from interviews that learners are highly motivated to access digital learning programmes and that they appreciate the content – especially the videos, related exercises and learning games – of »Ich will Deutsch lernen« [8].

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the portal is to be seen in the likely advancement of learner autonomy that is supported by a free and publicly-accessible learning programme. This in no way supersedes traditional, face-to-face courses, but rather, it opens up new opportunities for effective and continuous learning inside and beyond the classroom.

### References

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