

# THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING: A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE



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She has over six years experience of introducing Computer Mediated Language Learning in national and international organizations and has successfully designed, planned and delivered many online training programmes.

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She has supervised a two year project with the Cornelsen publishing house, trained the trainers and developed online teaching material for the virtual classroom and has led numerous workshops in and outside Germany.

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## **Abstract**

The Web provides an inexhaustible and stimulating source of teaching and learning material. However, to create successful and creative computer mediated language courses, appropriate technology needs to be selected according to the learner's individual needs.

How effective computers are in the language classroom will depend on the way the teacher and students use them. Successful online courses need to have motivated and well-trained online tutors.

Even though there is still a degree of disquiet and disbelief among language teachers and students that a language can be learnt online, there seems to be an increasing number of teachers engaged by the possibilities of new technology, willing to implement new media into their everyday teaching to enhance their lessons.

In order to get the best learning outcomes, a mix of face-to face sessions, self study and collaborative tutor assisted online learning appears to be the answer.

In this article, the author highlights the benefits and constraints of computer mediated language learning. She underlines the potential of new media in an online learning environment and of the necessity for creative online course management.

## **Introduction**

New technologies have enhanced language teaching in many ways. The Web provides an inexhaustible resource of language material for teachers and students with the great advantage that the material is culturally authentic and up-to-date. The integration of the Internet into language teaching and learning helps to overcome national and international boundaries, because users are able to communicate with other users around the world. The Internet plays a prominent role in language acquisition and teaching.

In spite of the fact that the purchase and use of new technology in schools and universities has been promoted and supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education, the euphorically estimated rapid increase of computer based language training in the new century has not as yet occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Even though this might sound disheartening, some interesting projects in the field of Computer Assisted Second Language Learning have been developed and successfully carried out in various educational sectors in recent years.

There are an increasing number of teachers who are eager to get involved with and implement new media in their language teaching and this will have its effect on the structure of courses and their delivery. Traditional face-to-face courses will always have their standing, but they will be influenced and complemented by new technology. How effective computers are in language course delivery, will depend on the way teachers and students use them.

## **Benefits and Constraints of Online Course Delivery**

A great number of people in Germany are still sceptical about learning online. Some find hard to believe, that communicative language learning can be delivered online. Quite a few teachers don't feel confident enough to use computers in the classroom, because they don't want to expose themselves to students who might be able to handle the computer more skillfully. Others fear the extra amount of work they'll have to manage on top of everything else, when having to design new courses. Employees often resent to work at the computer outside the office if they have to use the computer all day. However, in spite of all resentments, those people who started an online course with initial scepticism, often report that they were taken by surprise to find how different roles are perceived and what kind of strong reactions and emotions can be triggered online.

From the experience gained in developing and tutoring Online Language Courses<sup>2</sup> over the last four years, I have observed that asynchronous text based communication helped students to become more confident in their speaking skills. People who have to reply to somebody spontaneously in a real-time conversation (in chats or on the phone), often seem to struggle or even fail to produce a comprehensible reply, because they either 'have a blank' or are searching for words. In an asynchronous virtual learning environment, the learners have more time to reflect on their responses and access reference material, like dictionaries or course books. Hence, learners develop an ability to engage in planning and monitoring their output, gaining more confidence.

Computer mediated language learning has its great advantages, because with the help of computers, learning can be more focused, faster and more complex than with traditional media. Computers assist teachers by taking some of the workload off them, like grammar practice for example. Students can practise in a non-threatening environment as long and whenever they wish as the exercises are

available whenever needed. Learners can repeat exercises whenever necessary and get instant feedback. Another benefit of computer mediated language training is that activities can be adapted and tailored to a student's individual needs. Hence, facilitators can address individual problems either in private tutorials or address specific problems like grammar or spelling mistakes in an extra forum in order not to distract the flow of communication or embarrass individuals.

Another great advantage of the Internet for language learning is the endless amount of resources whether they are of cultural, historical and political nature, which are up-to-date, authentic and immediately available.

These benefits for online learning become even more relevant for those languages that are less commonly taught, where good and authentic print material often is not available. Good face-to-face trainers usually have excellent and inspiring models of face-to-face teaching to base courses on. The challenge, however, is to find new inspiring and creative solutions for online delivery.

Most of the published language course material is designed for face-to-face teaching or self study. Very little material has been published yet for the use of online course delivery. Hence, when using a course book, the challenge for the average online tutor is to design tasks around specific lessons that are meaningful to be covered online. It is essential to design the tasks in a way that they trigger online interaction. Most important is to keep students interested and motivated in carrying out the tasks and interact with each other. This requires a diversified repertoire of creative online teaching skills.

Online course material should be sufficiently flexible to cater for a variety of learning styles, personal skills and interests. In order to collaborate successfully students must understand that they need to take an active part in their learning. Hence, they must be willing to interact, experiment with language and reflect their own learning progress.

The most successful approach for online language course delivery is a blended approach including face-to-face sessions, synchronous and asynchronous sessions with the appropriate course material (books, CD-ROM, Audio CD). A precondition always is, that the tutors are all well trained online facilitators.<sup>3</sup>

The amount that should be delivered online and how much should be delivered face-to face will depend on the target group, the learning level and the skills required. The distance that students might have to travel to a central location will also be an important consideration.

## **Managing Discourse**

Successful online discussion and collaboration require specific communication skills and so it is essential for trainers to establish appropriate discourse strategies at the early stages of a course.

Breakdown in collaborative communication often results from a lack of knowledge of how to use communication skills or discourse strategies appropriately. In a face-to-face discussion a simple nod, a smile or even just a look of approval is often sufficient to encourage someone or indicate interest. A puzzled face or a frown might indicate that clarification is necessary. In an online environment, a simple nod or frown must be expressed in words or symbols.

Since online discourse techniques in an asynchronous learning environment differ from face-to-face conventions, they require special practice in order to facilitate cohesion in discussions and to enhance collaboration online. With a tutor's assistance, learners will develop their personal online style and learn to use the appropriate language and strategies to master meaningful discussions online. It is therefore useful to collect data about various discourse functions including how to:

- agree or disagree politely;
- ask for clarification;
- support others;
- show interest;
- ask for reassurance;
- refer to what has been said;
- summarize etc.

According to students' different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds, it is vital to raise awareness with regard to different perceptions. Effective communication requires the enhancement of appropriate discourse management in an intercultural context.

## **Conclusion**

The innovative potential of new technology in language course delivery is changing the ways we teach a language and indeed is changing the language itself.<sup>4</sup> Because of the lack of facial and physical interaction online, a good mix of online course material needs to be designed in a way that it caters for opportunities to interact, practise and expose the learner to authentic material and situations.

In order to keep the students' motivation levels high and to cater for a variety of learning styles, a blended approach seems to be the ideal way to deliver language courses online. This includes asynchronous and synchronous sessions, self study materials (language software, audio and video, Internet) as well as face-to-face sessions. Most important however is to provide a learning environment with guidance/facilitation by a creative tutor/teacher to keep students engaged and motivated.

A successful online course also needs the online tutors to be properly trained and motivated. They need to have experienced online training as a student themselves in order to understand the subtleties of this exciting medium.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schulen ans Netz, (an initiative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the German Telecom, 1999. <http://www.schulen-ans-netz.de>

<sup>2</sup> [www.abacus-uk.com](http://www.abacus-uk.com)

<sup>3</sup> Primetime, An English Course for Primary School Teachers, Cornelsen 2001-2003.

<sup>4</sup> Barnett, B. & Sharma, P., (2003). The Internet & Business English. Summertown Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Prendergast, G., (2003). Keeping Online Student Dropout Numbers Low. In GlobalEducator.