

OER use in intermediate language instruction: a case study

Robert Godwin-Jones¹

Abstract. This paper reports on a case study in the experimental use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) in intermediate level language instruction. The resources come from three sources: the instructor, the students, and open content repositories. The objective of this action research project was to provide student-centered learning materials, enhance student motivation, and encourage learner autonomy. The content modules, designed to complement and supplement materials from the commercial textbook used, represent a variety of disciplines and genres. Grammar tutorials cover the structures typically introduced in intermediate language study. Also included are modules on language self-study, which feature annotated guides to online language resources. To accommodate further student personal or professional interest, students were asked to find and curate additional reading or multimedia content.

Keywords: OER, student motivation, learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

At many institutions of higher learning in the United States, there is a language requirement for graduation, often consisting of completion of a four semester sequence of courses in the target language. This is the case currently at my institution, a large public university on the East Coast. After completing the required course sequence, the majority of students do not enroll in further instruction in the target language. This reflects both a practical impediment – the need to complete coursework in their major field of study – and a lack of interest in learning a second language. Because students generally do not continue language study beyond the fourth semester, most do not achieve a functional ability at a level sufficient for interpersonal or professional use. For the most part, they fail to see a connection between proficiency in a second language and their own lives now or in the future.

1. Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, USA; rgjones@vcu.edu

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A goal of this project was to motivate students to continue their study of the target language, in this case German, beyond that required by the university curriculum. That further language study could occur through enrollment in subsequent German courses, or more likely, through other avenues such as participation in study abroad or use of online language learning resources. Several approaches were used to motivate students and to equip them with the know-how to use online tools and services. That involved first making available a wider choice of learning materials than is generally the case, particularly if relying exclusively on a print textbook. That variety was designed to offer the possibility for students to connect with content of potential individual interest (see Tomlinson, 2016). Additionally, students created their own learning materials through finding, curating, and describing online resources for learning German, thus engaging in “participatory action research” (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002). Finally, learning modules were developed which targeted the use of online language learning resources and approaches. The goal was to provide students with specific resources for learning German, but also to give them the knowledge and skills to be informed online learners.

2. Method

In recent studies, OERs have been shown to be widely accepted by students, given reduced costs and local adaptability (Hilton, 2016). In this instance, OERs were used to expand areas of content and to engage students with resources useful in online language learning. The modules were developed based on materials taken from open sources and annotated for students at the intermediate level. Materials from OER repositories were integrated into the format used in all modules, based on a basic HTML template. Students had access through the course site in Blackboard and also on the open web. Additionally, students participated in a web site curation blog, designed to encourage students to discover, share, and learn from resources of personal interest (Gilmore, 2007).

3. Discussion

3.1. Grammar tutorials

Grammar tutorials supplemented the as-needed grammar sections of the textbook. As is normally the case today, the textbook did not provide comprehensive

presentations of grammar, but rather used a chunked approach, introducing selected aspects of the grammar at a time, with an emphasis on functional use in the context of unit content. This approach works well for the majority of students and integrates grammar functionally into task-based learning. However, for some adult learners, a more comprehensive and systematic grammar presentation aligns better to their analytical learning style. Others may prefer a more inductive approach using discovery learning (Boulton & Cobb, 2017). The online tutorials provide both options. Each starts with corpus-derived examples, inviting students to induce patterns (see Figure 1). Next, explicit rules are discussed, contrasting English and German usage, while walking the learner through multiple, annotated usage examples. At the end of each section, formative assessments provide immediate feedback. The tutorials cover areas typically introduced at the intermediate level and also include review modules.

Figure 1. Grammar tutorial

Passive Voice
VCU German Tutorial Series

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Introduction: The Uses of "werden"

In German, "werden" is used in a variety of ways: Those include as a **stand-alone verb** (= to become) and as a helping verb (plus infinitive) **to speak about future or probable events**. We will be looking at an additional usage, namely **to build passive verb constructions**.

The following sentences are taken from the *Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache des 20. Jahrhunderts (DWDS)*. Follow these steps to gain insight into the uses of werden:

1) Read the sentences and determine how you think werden is being used, i.e., as a stand-alone verb, to talk about the future, or the passive (hint: it is a 2-part verb, like the future). Mouse over each use of the verb to see if you are correct.

Ich **werde** diese Schreckensnacht nie vergessen.
Die Kinder **wurden** auf den Arm **genommen** und bekamen Schokolade.
Die **wird** niemand le**wurden...genommen**
Dieser Film **wird** un**Passive (past tense)**
Das alles hat Konturen, **die man nie vergessen wird**.
Gegen zehn Uhr **wurde** der Park unverhofft still.
Ich **werde** heute das Konsulat mit meinem Transit verlassen.
Mutter und Tochter **werden** interniert.

2) Try to determine from the examples the pattern for constructing the German passive, then answer the question below:

Value: 2

How is the passive voice constructed in German?

a. werden + infinitive
 b. werden + past participle
 c. werden + conjugated verb

3.2. Content modules

The content modules were designed to extend the range of topics and genres of texts. Students enrolled in this course come from a variety of academic majors. In order to show the relevance of German to different fields, texts and media introduced in the modules come from a variety of areas, such as music history, politics, physics, and engineering. The texts, taken from open content sources, represent a variety of genres, from fairytale to scientific treatise and vary in length and difficulty level. The resources are annotated for language and culture. Each text is accompanied by comprehensive questions and interactive exercises. They also include annotated vocabulary lists, along with flashcards and exercises. Whenever possible, the modules incorporate audio and video; streaming video was used as well.

Figure 2. Content module

Vom Mäuschen, Vögelchen und der Bratwurst

Brüder Grimm

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Punkte [alles drucken](#)

Vorschau

Schauen Sie sich das folgende Video an, versuchen Sie so viel wie möglich zu verstehen, dann lesen Sie die Brüder Grimm Geschichte vom *Mäuschen, Vögelchen und der Bratwurst* auf den folgenden Seiten.

VOKABELN

- aufgeteilt - *divided up*
- der Koch - *cook*
- das Gemüse - *vegetable*
- die Pfanne - *pan*
- springen - *to jump*
- schlingen - *to wind, turn*
- das Holz - *wood*
- holen - *to fetch*
- den Tisch decken - *set table*
- der Rabe - *raven*
- das Los - *lot*
- der Eimer - *bucket*
- suchen - *to search*
- verdächtig - *suspicious*
- falsche Briefe - *bogus credentials*
- ersaufen - *to drown*



▶ 0:07 / 5:26

[nach oben](#) | [nächste Seite](#)

Figure 2 shows a module on a Grimm Brothers' fairytale. The story is previewed using a YouTube video presenting a dramatic reading of the story followed by the text itself accompanied by audio recordings of native speakers reading the text. Some of the language used in this case is in Bavarian dialect. Other variations of German are included in the modules, so as to expose students to the reality

of dialect forms in German. The option of incorporating this kind of variety of texts, genres, and language variance is one of the advantages online OER has over conventional language textbooks.

3.3. Student-created materials

In addition to the modules created by the instructor or linked from OER sites, students in the course also worked with resources curated by the students themselves. Students were asked to find sites which aligned with course content. A class blog allowed sharing of the resources found (see Figure 3). Once a site was identified, students tagged the resource and provided a description in German. Students were assigned to read each other's posts and rate them; they also wrote comments. The student-curated sites expanded the range of content and genres. Sites curated included personal blogs, YouTube channels, websites for children, news reports, travel logs, food descriptions, and scientific reports.

Figure 3. Curation blog

<p>UNTERHALTUNG / ENTERTAINMENT</p> <p>DER POSTILLON</p> <p>30 APR., 2017 VIDEO</p>  <p>★★★★★ 2 Votes</p> <p>"Druckkosten, Witwen- und Waisenrente für die Angehörigen verstorbener Auslandskorrespondenten, Schmiргelder für Exklusiventhüllungen: Ehrliche, unabhängige und schnelle Nachrichten haben ihren Preis – und das schon seit 1845." Diese Website ist eine satirische und komische Zeitung. Die Website publiziert satirischen Artikel und Videos. Die Inhalte sind über viele verschiedenen Themen, zum Beispiel Politik, Wirtschaft, Sport und Wissenschaft. [...]</p> <p>Humor Politik Video</p>	<p>ALLTAGSLEBEN / EVERYDAY LIFE</p> <p>DEUTSCHE LIEBEN SAUERKRAUT</p> <p>26 APR., 2017</p> <p>★★★★★ 12 Votes</p> <p>Sauerkraut ist geliebt von allen Deutschen. Alle von die Europäische Lander prepareren sauerkraut anders. Man kann viele verschieden lebensmittel mit sauerkraut kochen, aber die Deutschen machen das am besten. Sauerkraut kommt aus Kohl, und das Kohl kommt meistens aus Norddeutschland. Verschiedene regionen prepareren Sauerkraut in anderen Formen. Norddeutschland isst sauerkraut süß und Süddeutschland isst sauerkraut salzig. Video: [...]</p> <p>Deutsche Welle Essen, Transkription Übungen Video, Vokabeln</p> <p>REISEN / TRAVEL</p> <p>DIE RADTOUREN IN DEUTSCHLAND</p> <p>19 APR., 2017</p>	<p>KULTUR / CULTURE</p> <p>10 DINGE, DIE SIE ÜBER BEETHOVEN WISSEN SOLLTEN</p> <p>26 APR., 2017</p>  <p>★★★★★ 11 Votes</p> <p>Dieser Artikel diskutiert über das Leben und die Kompositionen von Beethoven. Es gibt eine Liste. Er diskutiert über zehn Aspekte von sein Leben, von sein Geburtstag bis seine neunte Sinfonie. Meistens ist dieser Artikel gut für Deutsch 202. Er benutze viel Grammatik von Deutsch 202 und ist sehr interessant. Der Artikel ist wohl zu lang, [...]</p> <p>Deutsche Welle Musik</p>
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3.4. Modules on tools and services

Language learners today have a wide range of possible online resources for gaining and maintaining language proficiency. These range from simple flashcard

programs or tourist glossaries to full-featured language learning programs such as Duolingo. Social media and online gaming provide opportunities to engage with others in language-mediated activities. However, the very wealth of choices can be a problem. It's been increasingly recognized how important a role language teachers play in guiding students to appropriate resources (Hubbard, 2013). For this project, students had access to an annotated list of tools/services. Additionally, they worked with a series of tutorials focused on online language learning sites/apps. That included vocabulary learning programs, online dictionaries/concordances, machine translation programs, and tandem-learning services. Whenever possible, the modules incorporated materials from open sources. The tutorial on Google Translate, for example, included a walk-through and exercises created by the Open University specifically for learners of German.

4. Conclusion

The modules used in the course provided a wider choice of topics than is generally the case in language instruction at this level in the US. As discussed in Godwin-Jones (2017a), students found the materials to be engaging and motivating; according to student questionnaires, the modules “helped increase interest in German and led them to explore other online language learning resources” (p. 10).

All content was available outside the course-restricted learning management systems/virtual learning environments so as to be available for possible future use after the course was over or even after the students leave the university. The modules on language learning tools and services provide information about the benefits to students in future language learning endeavors. All resources were designed to work well on mobile devices, so as to integrate into devices functioning today as students' daily companions (see Godwin-Jones, 2017b). The curation project is intended to provide students with an opportunity to find language resources of personal or professional interest, with the goal that that process might motivate them towards further language study.

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