

CAPSTONE PROJECT, CETL SPRING 2005 “ONLINE PROJECT FOR SECOND & THIRD YEAR GERMAN: GRAMMAR EXERCISES”

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Project Design:

I began this project during the summer of 1999, when I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. I set out to develop computer-based grammar exercises for second year German instruction at the college level. I wanted these exercises to be independent of any second-year college textbook, since the idea is to market them in the US at some point. Furthermore, all the exercises in this project are entirely contextualized, which makes them unique, as most online exercises that I have seen are textbook-specific or teacher- and class-specific and thus not really “accessible” to wider audiences.

Initially, I authored these exercises in a Macintosh computer software, called Dasher, which was developed for educational purposes by two language teachers to make the writing of computer-based exercises easier and faster for other teachers. While it was possible to use these exercises in our Macintosh computer labs at the University of Minnesota, I always felt that these exercises needed to be converted into online, web-accessible format, so that students could access these materials any time and from anywhere. The fact that students had to go to a specific computer lab on campus in order to do these exercises outside of class, “prevented” many of them from working through these exercises independently. Many of them said that it would be easier if they had access to these exercises from home, since it was difficult to work around full and complex university and work schedules for many students.

So this academic year at Minnesota State University, I converted the exercises into online format and published them on my website for German courses. The URL is <http://oit.mnsu.edu/germanweb/>. The reason for not publishing these exercises within D2L, or for that matter all of the materials published on this site, has to do with my need for greater flexibility, which D2L does not have, as it bases access to materials on student registration in a particular course. I need to be able to send students not registered in a specific course to these exercises and materials, as I am using them in both second and third year courses, in independent studies and D2L would not give me the flexibility. Furthermore, in D2L I would have to upload materials to each course each semester and I do not have the time for this. This is however not to say that I do not use D2L at all. I do use it whenever something is specific for a class and also when I do not want the rest of the world to see what the students are writing. Their privacy is important and thus I make use of both website types as appropriate.

As I re-authored these exercises, I revised, added to and in general enhanced the exercises. I also began phase two of the project as I intend to develop it into a much larger project. I will describe this briefly at the end.

Project Description:

As I wanted these exercises to be independent of a particular textbook and fully contextualized, I wrote a “family saga” for the entire set of exercises, which was flexible enough to address all the grammar aspects covered in second-year German courses, as well as cultural and other content issues commonly found within second-year German curricula at academic institutions. Each chapter focuses on one grammar topic and one content topic, forming a mini-story within the larger family saga, using every day situations and vocabulary appropriate for the intermediate levels. The content covers many cultural aspects, e.g. the multi-cultural society in Germany, Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, traditional and modern role distributions in families, environmental protection, student life in Germany, childhood in and escape from former East Germany, family & friends, etc. which a teacher could use for a follow up

discussion / practice in class. But most importantly, there is a lot of humor in all these stories. I am a firm believer in and advocate for making (grammar) instruction fun and humorous. Many personal experiences or those of my friends have shaped and inspired the content of these stories, but many are also made up entirely.

Each chapter is structured in the following manner: the first exercise is a review/warm-up exercise followed by exercise(s) covering material students are learning to control. Exercises become increasingly more difficult throughout each chapter. With few exceptions, the final exercise is intended for the advanced students in the class, who usually get through the previous exercises very quickly and feel unchallenged by them. I think that it was important to have built this into the project as well, because it is a common enough problem, that the advanced students are bored by the at-level materials. Giving these students extra exercises to do also helps out with the problem of what to do with them, while other students continue to work on the at-level exercises at a slower pace.

The typing that students do in these exercises is limited wherever possible. Only word order exercises require extensive retyping, but the reason for this should be obvious. Students get instant feedback on their performance by clicking the “check answer” button. Incorrect answers are marked by crossing out incorrect letters or words or with a comment, depending on the way the exercise is set up.

I used online templates to write these exercises, called ExerciseMakers and then edited them and incorporated them into my website.

These exercises are published at the following URL:

<http://oit.mnsu.edu/germanweb/MyGrammarExs/GrammarIndex.htm>

As you can see there, there are currently 26 chapters that each contain on average 3-6 exercises. I will be adding a few more chapters and exercises to this project, that were not part of the original design.

Germany underwent an orthography reform that was implemented initially in 1999 (only in very specific situations and publications) and officially in 2004. I used the new spellings according to the orthography reform in this project from the get-go. This can be a bit confusing to students, since many textbooks are still printed with the old spellings, even though this is declining now, as more publishers are coming out with new editions that use the new spelling reform. While it still is confusing to many students, as many High-School teachers do not use the new spelling reform or use both at the same time, I find it necessary to use it consistently, as it is the way German will be and is written. Thus these exercises familiarize students with the new spellings, which they do encounter now in many German publications, such as newspapers and many recent publications, even though not consistently at this point.

Use of Exercises:

I use these exercises regularly in my classes, especially during the one day a week that I am in the Global Learning lab. The grammar has been previously taught and students have already done exercises in their textbook to practice these structures. While students work individually on these online exercises, I am available for individual consultation to help them understand and work through these materials. I feel that these one-on-one sessions are effective and the students tend to ask questions there that they do not ask in front of the entire class to avoid looking “foolish.” Students like the immediate feedback that they get while doing the exercises and they like the fact that they can go back to these exercises anytime they want to.

Secondly, I often find that I have students who have fallen behind or never covered certain areas in a previous class, and this is a very convenient way for me to give them extra materials for study and practice without my having a lot of extra grading.

This semester I have a student who is doing an independent study on advanced German grammar, and again, I can send the student to these exercises in addition to the exercises and materials in the textbook and it is working very well, freeing up my time and allowing the student to learn at his/her own pace.

By the way, there is a counter and tracker on the site, so that I at least have a general idea how many people access the site and specific pages in the site (without getting specific data about a person using the site). It gives me a general idea to see that the materials are used and also to a certain extent when they are used and for how long. I do not look at this generally, but it is nice to know that I can when needed.

Students' Likes and Dislikes About These Exercises:

Students love the immediate feedback that they receive on their work. They comment on this all the time. They also love working on computers. They are a generation that has grown up with and around computers and it has significantly shaped how they learn. They clearly prefer online-exercises to exercises in the textbook, where they have to write in answers. Furthermore, they like that they can relate to the characters in the stories who experience similar and dissimilar things from them and they love the humor in the stories.

Occasionally, there are students who simply do not like working on computers or who have limited internet access outside of class and they therefore would prefer to do these exercises on paper. I try to accommodate them as much as I can.

Another dislike many students have expressed is the fact that a typo is rated as an incorrect answer. Oftentimes, there is an overlap between "a typo" and a grammatical error, but occasionally it is not, esp. in the word order exercises where students have to form sentences using several parts. If there is a typo in one of the words, the entire sentence is scored as incorrect even though they might have gotten the word order correctly. But these are "smaller" details that I think both the students and I can deal with and work around as best we can. This just shows that technology isn't perfect and simply another tool to deliver learning materials. It cannot do the learning for the student, just assist them in it.

(Possible) Future Expansion of the Project:

I have already begun with one aspect of the expansion of this project, namely to develop reading comprehension and discussion questions based on the thematic content of the exercises. I will ask students e.g. to re-read the content of the exercise and either discuss the opinion expressed in the exercise with a partner or group, to write a response or describe what they do personally based on what the story character said. These responses are emailed to the instructor or posted in D2L. Students clearly resent the idea of having to write their answers out on paper when dealing with these online materials, esp. the responses to the content, which at times they had to do, as I'm still working out a technological glitch that will not submit their answers to the instructor.

Another larger expansion will be the videotaping of people /events in Germany on a variety of topics, so that I can develop listening comprehension exercises and deliver them in an online format as well. I will explore my options for this and perhaps begin work on this part of the project over the summer.

The grand idea here is to develop my entire curriculum around this project in place of a textbook as it will give me greater flexibility to make adjustments and to make them more quickly. While this is incredibly time consuming and labor-intensive to develop and set up, I think that it will be well worth my time in the long run, as it will give me great flexibility in making changes and adjustments in the curriculum and to keep it fresh and current, something that is very difficult to do with textbooks, esp. in a subject area that is on a decline at US institutions and traditional textbook publications do not sell easily and therefore producing a new textbook through traditional venues, is much more difficult to market. Therefore, I

intend to exploit the online media to the fullest possible extent, while firmly keeping an eye on student learning and their active engagement in this learning process.

Samples From the Online Project Included:

- Chapter Index
- 4 Sample exercises:
 - Chapter 1-II present tense verb conjugation, fill in the gap exercise with reading comprehension and follow up personal question at the bottom of the exercise.
 - Chapter 2-III word order and verb conjugation. This is an example for the most typing the students will have to do within the exercises and it is the one that they complain the most about because of the typos, which I addressed above.
 - Chapter 6-III animation (book flies in from the left and lands on the book shelf) multiple choice question on the animation. This is a spatial, motion vs. location-based concept that deal with specific position verbs, case and prepositions, hence the animation to address this. The animations are at times counter what students would expect to point out to them that the choice of verb and case makes a huge difference in German unlike in English.
 - Chapter 16 multiple choice exercise with brief feedback in the field to the right.