

Teaching a German Online Course Based on Multiliteracy Theory - Practical Insights

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Abstract. *This paper deals with the methods and challenges of teaching a German online course to non-native speakers of German at a British university based on the theory of multiliteracies by the New London Group described in 1996. The course aims to provide knowledge concerning, for example, the German grammar, exercises for listening comprehension, translation and creative writing while using authentic materials. The paper considers the course content, objectives, learning outcomes and recommendations for teaching a German online course for non-native students.*

Keywords – *German, Internet, online course, multiliteracy, non-native students.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to provide a pedagogical framework with examples for tasks while teaching a German course to non-native speakers of German in an online setting. It starts with a short introduction about the specific type of communication in an online setting, which is different from the situation in a real classroom at a university. The course materials involve work with scientific texts, original newspaper content (articles, interviews) and audio-visual material (radio shows, podcasts, and video-clips). Therefore, this paper next considers the theory of multiliteracies by the New London Group described in 1996 to build a fitting pedagogical framework for working with different types of media and communication channels in a German course outside of Germany. The paper then presents an overview of currently available online courses in the UK and the content of an existing German online course in Edinburgh, which applies the theory of multiliteracies and was developed for the German department at the University of Edinburgh in the UK. The course includes examples for tasks and assessment.

The University of Edinburgh traditionally offers a year-abroad in the third year of German studies. During this year students either study at a university or receive a work-placement in a German speaking country. The content of courses at the foreign university in the year-abroad might differ from the programme in Edinburgh and/or students might not study German during their work-placement. Students can forget some of the knowledge earned in year 2 and therefore the transition to year 4 back in Scotland might prove to be more difficult, as shown by the results of tests and exams in previous groups in year 4. The question appeared then, how it would be possible to improve the knowledge of students before their start of year 4. How

could the year-abroad be used to repeat topics from the previous 2 years of study and prepare them for the tasks in year 4?

Based on the course programme in year 1, 2 and 4, the German department in Edinburgh decided to design an online course for German specifically for students in their year-abroad. This course helps them to repeat the material earlier covered in year 1 and 2, but also supports students with various exercises on syntax, creative writing, textual analysis and listening comprehension, which prepare them better for year 4.

There are several other online courses for German on offer in the United Kingdom. The University of Dundee proposes German - intensive and revision courses by distance learning. The intensive course lasts 25 weeks, is designed for students with some knowledge of German and online exercises are checked and commented by a language tutor. The teaching material consists of an integrated online textbook and listening comprehension. The revision course is useful for people with a more advanced level of German and takes 10 weeks [12]. Course fees for these courses are between 340-600 pounds Sterling. The London Kingston College offers a blended learning German course from beginner's to elementary level. Students study the first term in class with a teacher and the second term is taught online in a virtual class with a language tutor. The assessment for the course includes reading, writing and oral exams [7]. The Open University offers free online German courses for everyone including: Beginners' German: Places and people, Beginners' German: Food and drink, Advanced German: Regional landscapes, Advanced German: Language, culture and history as well as Intermediate German: Understanding spoken German. In order to participate in these courses students need to register with the Open University and sign up for the individual course. On completion of the course students receive a free statement of participation [11].

During the design of the online course in Edinburgh, these course programmes of other universities or the Goethe Institute in the UK were not taken into consideration, because the aim was to meet the specific needs of students based on the course programmes at the University of Edinburgh. This is the first online course for third year students of German of its kind, which is taught only online. It was started in the winter term 2018 and it is planned to be repeated in winter 2019. The following parts of the paper will describe the background and content of the course in more detail.

This online course for German might be of interest for other universities, which plan to design their own online courses of German for the year abroad. The syllabus and types of exercises of the online course can be used as an example and give the necessary input for other courses about German online in different countries.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section of the paper provides some information on the specific type of communication in an online setting in comparison to a real classroom at a university. Further, it presents the theory of multiliteracies to build a fitting pedagogical framework and syllabus for a German online course outside of Germany.

When people communicate online they use the so-called Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is the name used to describe the second generation of the World Wide Web, where it moved static HTML pages to a more interactive and dynamic web experience. The meaning of Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly. Web 2.0 is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online via social media, blogging and Web-based communities [2]. According to Herring (2011), there have been significant changes in the past 10 years regarding communication online and new possibilities for the use of the Internet were developed. People share data, edit existing information and co-write texts in asynchronous or quasi-synchronous communication from different places of the world [5].

People communicate differently due to new technologies and cultural diversity in the world. This also includes different platforms for communication and social media. Herring (2018) states that there is a connection between the behaviour of people on social networks and their off-line communication [3]. The strategies used online also influence the way people behave offline, because they are constantly using the Internet on their smartphones to check information, send a text or call someone via an online application, listen to music on a social network. The Internet provides different types of interaction such as communication, file-sharing, collaboration between a teacher and his/her students. The file-sharing offers the opportunity to access and share different types of media and post content, which is available for everyone registered to an online-teaching platform.

A difference to the environment of real classroom interaction is the physical distance between participants online and an asynchronous way of communication. In order to ask a question or receive feedback students need to write the teacher and a reaction might take longer than in a regular classroom setting. Students are required to work more independently and plan their coursework accordingly.

An online teaching platform also includes the necessity to communicate mostly in a written form, although technology today allows also the use of voice-transmission such as in Skype or other applications, which needs to be negotiated between the teacher and students based on the requirements for each course individually. Students work with a multimodal text online and not a single textbook. A

multimodal text uses a combination of two or more communication modes, e.g. print, image and spoken text as in movies or PC presentations. In a classroom the integrated and interdependent activities such as *listening*, *speaking*, *reading*, *writing*, *viewing* and *representing* are often used in answering questions and composing texts. Any combination of these activities can be used to answer or write new texts with different media elements [9].

In order to teach students with multimodal texts they have to learn to understand and decode the content of such texts. In 1996, the term MULTILITERACIES appeared in the research of the New London Group, which consisted of ten academics in New London, New Hampshire, in the United States. Their aim was to develop new literacy pedagogy. As a result, the New London Group developed a PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES [10], which focuses not only on reading, analyzing and understanding of standard printed texts, but also on the decoding and application of new technologies like the Internet. This new literacy pedagogy reacts to the new learning needs of students, and teaches them to use and understand new media technologies for communicating in a culturally diverse world. The aim of the New London Group was to support students to take part in 'dynamic, technological and culturally diverse societies' [8, p.103].

According to the New London Group, media include LINGUISTIC, AUDITORY, VISUAL and GESTURAL MODES OF MEANING [8]. LINGUISTIC MODES include language. AUDITORY MODES may consist of music, voice-overs, and sound-effects. VISUAL MODES include, for example, screen formats, perspectives, images, layouts and colors. GESTURAL MODES can be represented by body language, gestures, feelings and behavior [10].

According to the New London Group [10], these four modes are closely connected, but they differ in the following pedagogical moves, which are relevant for teaching situations: SITUATED PRACTICE, OVERT INSTRUCTION, CRITICAL FRAMING and TRANSFORMED PRACTICES. SITUATED PRACTICE is a method for learners to experience authentic situations in the classroom, in which they are challenged to apply their knowledge in a practical way.

According to Doucette-Vanthuyne 'overt instruction is scaffolded learning by the teacher to foster critical understanding through directions and providing sources of information to the learners' [4]. For CRITICAL FRAMING, students are confronted with unknown information and need to relate it to their previous life experiences. According to Kalantzis and Cope [6], CRITICAL FRAMING offers options to analyze various texts in their social and cultural context. With TRANSFORMED PRACTICE, students are involved in classroom activities, where they put their actions in relation to their own aims.

During a German online course, the course materials (e.g. literary texts, television and the Internet) can be analyzed according to the *linguistic*, *auditory*, *visual* and *gestural modes* proposed by the New London Group [10].

Students need to learn about these *modes* in the media to decode and critically analyze their content in the classroom. Then they can also apply them in their everyday use.

In class, these modes can be trained with tasks for **VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT, READING AND ANALYZING, LISTENING AND WATCHING ACTIVITIES** in relation to the cultural and social context in Germany. If students are not native-speakers, they need to receive sufficient cultural, political and social background information about Germany. Then they can apply this knowledge to practical tasks in class and everyday life. The next section of this paper presents the pedagogical framework and tasks of an existing German online course at a British university. That section will provide insights on how the **PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES** can be applied in an online course.

III. METHODS

This section examines the pedagogical framework, based on the **PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES**, of an existing German course in the third year of German studies at the University of Edinburgh, UK. The context of the course, its content, course objectives, learning outcomes and assessment are presented.

The German department at the University of Edinburgh offers the following degree programs for German: German Studies, German and Russian, German and English literature, German and Classics, German and Social Policy, German and Linguistics. German can be studied at honours level either as a single or a joint honors degree. The studies for German last four years. In year 1 students start with German language courses, which are continued in year 2 with added courses on German literature, textual analysis and translation. Year 3 is spent in a German-speaking country studying at university or in a work-experience placement. In Year 4 students have language classes, classes on German style, translation and textual analysis [13]. Optionally, students may take courses on German literature, German language and society. The aim of the German online course is to support 3rd year students during their year-abroad in Germany and prepare them for year 4 back at the University of Edinburgh.

Students of this German online course concurrently took courses in Classics, History, French, Business, Politics, Russian and Italian. Their language level was around B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). According to the CEFR descriptors, students at the B2 level ‘can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation’ [1]. They can write texts on very different topics, using a large vocabulary, with a detailed argumentation of the pros and cons regarding the given situation or circumstances.

There is a German diaspora and the German consulate in Edinburgh, which organise several cultural events in different Scottish cities. The Goethe-Institute in Glasgow

provides language-classes for all, organises cultural events and closely collaborates with schools all over Scotland.

The course content designer and editor of this German course is a native German speaker, with knowledge of English at C1. She holds a PhD in Russian from the University of Glasgow and a degree for teaching Russian as a foreign language from Moscow State University. Previously, she designed and taught two online courses about Academic writing for the Northern (arctic) Federal University and the Kazan Federal University in Russia between 2013-2017. Additionally, she published a paper about her experience of teaching a Russian media course for foreign students at the University of Edinburgh.

The German online course lasts 8 months, from October to May. It consists of four modules: 1. ‘DeutscheLiteratur und deutscher Film’ (German literature and film) 2. ‘SozialeMedien in Deutschland’ (Social media in Germany) 3. ‘Wissenschaft und Essay’ (Science and essay) 4. ‘Behinderung und Inklusion’ (Disability and inclusion)

The course is mainly taught in German. The language is only switched to English, when students show obvious difficulties in understanding and expressing themselves in German.

The aim of the German online course is to support 3rd year students during their year-abroad in Germany and prepare them for year 4 back at the University of Edinburgh. With this course students receive background information about the social and cultural context of life in modern Germany, which will be of use during their stay in Germany. At the same time the course helps students to keep their language level, repeat several grammar topics and introduces them to more complex syntactic structures, which will enable a more smooth transition into year 4 at the university. Additionally, students learn new vocabulary, read and analyse texts from original German newspapers and scientific papers, write and translate texts, listen to and watch a variety of audio-visual material (programmes from the radio, podcasts and videos in German). In order to work with these materials students need to be able to understand and decode the **LINGUISTIC, AUDITORY, VISUAL, and GESTURAL MODES OF MEANING** [8] in all teaching materials. These modes are trained during the German online course with tasks for **VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT, READING AND ANALYZING, LISTENING AND WATCHING ACTIVITIES** in relation to the cultural and social context in Germany.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines several exercises from the online course and discusses their content. Each module of the online course consists of exercises regarding listening comprehension, grammar, translation, open writing, multiple-choice, fill in the blanks exercises and sentence order. Each exercise consists of a description, instruction, an example, a grammar reminder, the exercise itself and a feedback section. Some exercises are automatically graded on the university online-platform LEARN, but translation, open-writing exercises and essays were graded by a language

tutor, who also provided recommendations for students. In the following, some exercises are provided in order to show, how students train the above-mentioned modes of meaning.

Exercise 1 - translation

Übersetzen Sie die folgenden Sätze. Achtung: in einigen Sätzen wird das Modalverb in seiner normalen Bedeutung gebraucht und in anderen in subjektiver Bedeutung.

1. Can Boris Gündel try his record in Kappeln?
2. He was allowed to try his record in Kappeln.
3. You must support him.
4. You mustn't ignore this important cause.
5. Shall we look at the race next weekend?
6. He ought not to have given up his hope to succeed.
7. He couldn't cope with the resistance in Lower Saxony.
8. He couldn't have done that if he had not pushed on with his project.

This exercise asks students to translate the eight sentences from English into German. The grammar topic is modal verbs with a subjective meaning, which can cause problems when translating from English into German, because modal verbs in English work differently at times. For example, 'must not' is not translated literally as 'muss nicht', but 'darf nicht'. At the same time this exercise provides the opportunity to learn more about the functioning of politeness in English in comparison to German. This exercise trains the LINGUISTIC MODE of meaning. The following exercise 2 is a watching exercise.

Exercise 2 - multiple choice

Instruction

Please watch the video-programme "Sommer-Uni 2015. Wieviel Heterogenität verträgt Schule?" and try to select the correct answer for the multiple choice questions.

Schauen Sie das Programm "Sommer-Uni 2015. Wie viel Heterogenität verträgt Schule?". Dann versuchen Sie aus den folgenden Multiple - Choice Fragen die richtige Antwort auszuwählen.

Question 1

Was ist das Kernziel der Cornelsen-Stiftung?

- A. Förderung von Unterricht
- B. Förderung von Lehrern
- C. Förderung von Schulen
- D. Förderung von Kindern

Correct answer Question 1

- A. **Förderung von Unterricht**
- B. Förderung von Lehrern
- C. Förderung von Schulen
- D. Förderung von Kindern

Feedback for right answer

Korrekt!

Feedback for wrong answer

Schauen Sie sich das Video noch einmal an.

This exercise trains *auditory, visual and gestural modes*, because students need to understand each speaker in this

video, the content of each speech and have to evaluate the gestures, that speakers use to underline their words. This exercise can prove to be more difficult, because participants in this discussion speak with a natural speed, which is not especially prepared for foreign learners. Students should be ready to decode the unknown vocabulary in the conversations based on the context and try to understand the main points each participant mentions. Gestures differ depending on the culture of each country and students need to learn the specific gestures typical for professional communication in Germany.

Exercise 3 - syntax

Description

This exercise tests the understanding of syntactic order in a German sentence. Diese Übung testet das Verständnis des Satzbaus in einem deutschen Satz.

Rewrite the complete sentence by ordering the 4 elements below. Schreiben Sie einen kompletten Satz indem Sie die 4 Elemente richtig anordnen.

Example: der Mann, kommen, wird, morgen

Answer: Der Mann wird morgen kommen.

Instruction: Rewrite the complete sentence by ordering the elements below. Schreiben Sie einen kompletten Satz indem Sie die einzelnen Wörter richtig anordnen.

Question 1: wurden - Maßnahmen - behinderter Kinder - die Aufnahme - durchdachter - im Zuge - Schulen - auf - vorbereitet.

This exercise trains the use of syntactic order in German, which quite often differs from English sentence order. To build correct sentences students need to be sure of the vocabulary in each sentence, so that they can define the role of each word in the syntactic order. The exercise helps students to gain a better understanding of the LINGUISTIC MODE of meaning.

The next exercise presents an open writing exercise.

Exercise 4 - open writing exercise

Pro und Contra: "Handyverbot in Lehrveranstaltungen an der Uni"

Hintergrund: In Prüfungen sind Mobiltelefone aller Art an allen deutschen Universitäten verboten. Aber laut einer Umfrage der Zeitschrift UNICUM.de klingelt bei vier von zehn Studenten gelegentlich das Mobiltelefon mitten in einer Vorlesung oder einem Seminar.

Davon fühlen sich sowohl andere Studenten als auch Professoren gestört. Deshalb stellen sich viele Fachbereiche die Frage, ob es nicht sinnvoll wäre, den Gebrauch von mobilen Kommunikationsgeräten nicht nur in Prüfungen sondern auch in allen Lehrveranstaltungen zu verbieten.

Thema: "Handyverbot in Lehrveranstaltungen an der Uni"

Aufgabe: Überlegen Sie, welche Vor- und Nachteile ein

Verbot von Mobiltelefonen und anderen mobilen Kommunikationsmitteln an der Universität hat. Präsentieren Sie Ihre Argumente mit Beispielen. Recherchieren Sie auch Informationen zur Verwendung von Mobiltelefonen unter Studenten in Großbritannien.

This exercise combines several tasks such as analysing media information from the UK and discussing the situation concerning the use of mobile phones at German universities during classes. Students need to express their own thoughts in relation to a current topic in the German society and present arguments based on media coverage in Germany and the UK. In this case the tasks READING, ANALYZING and WRITING require an understanding of the LINGUISTIC, AUDITORY, and VISUAL MODES of meaning.

These four exercises presented examples how the study with an online-learning platform can help to train the decoding and understanding of LINGUISTIC, AUDITORY, VISUAL, and GESTURAL MODES OF MEANING [8] in different teaching materials, which are provided and graded by a language tutor. These modes are trained during the German online course with tasks for VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT, READING AND ANALYZING, LISTENING AND WATCHING ACTIVITIES.

The course assessment also includes an in-course essay in German, which should consist of 3000 words and needs to discuss a selected topic using primary and secondary sources for argumentation and examples. This essay is part of the overall grade, which students receive at the end of the course.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to provide a pedagogical framework for a German online course in the UK, based on the theory of multiliteracies. For the correct use and understanding of communication in different audio-visual media and the Internet, students had to learn to recognize, decode, and analyze the LINGUISTIC, AUDITORY, VISUAL and GESTURAL MODES OF MEANING of these media. The methods for multiliteracies pedagogy in this German online course included *providing background information, listening and watching activities, reading/analyzing activities* and *vocabulary development*. The assessment at the end of the course revealed that students gained a good or very good knowledge of the course topics. Students passed the in-course essay with good to very good grades.

It can be concluded that the German online course effectively applied the pedagogical framework based on the theory of multiliteracies. It provided students with a sound knowledge about social media, German literature, disability and inclusion as well as science and essay writing. Students gained a higher proficiency in written expression, listening comprehension, textual analysis and knowledge of new vocabulary. The transition from the year-abroad to the 4th year will be easier after the participation in the German online course during the year in a German-speaking country. The online course can be regarded as a successful project,

which will be also continued in the winter term 2019. This online course for German might be of interest for other universities, which plan to design their own online courses of German for the year abroad to improve students' performances in the final year of study. The syllabus and types of exercises of the German online course can be used as an example and give the necessary input for other courses about German online in different countries.

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