

IV. German Online

Overview

Martina Möllering (Macquarie)

The following contribution by Uschi Felix is positioned within the wider area of computer assisted language learning (CALL). It discusses language learning online with a view to identifying best practice, here defined as “using the most appropriate tools to their best potential to achieve sound pedagogical processes and outcomes.” Two major forms of online learning are being identified:

- stand-alone online courses that strive to operate as virtual classrooms; here the technology acts as both tutor and tool;
- add-on activities to classroom teaching or distance education courses; here the technology is used primarily as a tool and communication device.

Felix discusses online language learning against the background of constructivist approaches to learning. She provides a broad distinction between, on the one hand, cognitive constructivism, where the focus is on the individual in the group, cognition occurs within the individual and the focus is on the outcome of learning and, on the other hand, social constructivism, where the context of cognition is socially and culturally situated, knowledge is constructed in shared endeavours and there is a strong link between processes and outcomes.¹ The author stresses the sound pedagogical values embedded in social constructivist approaches, such as addressing needs and interests of students and engaging them in authentic, real-life tasks but she also points to the challenges of such approaches. Based on an evaluation of the relevant literature, she lists the following major concerns:

¹ For a detailed discussion see Uschi Felix: “The Web as a Vehicle for Constructivist Approaches in Language Teaching.” *ReCALL* 14 (1), 2002, 2-15.

- problems that might arise through poor group dynamics;
- the need for labour-intensive authentic assessment procedures;
- the added difficulty in achieving linguistic accuracy;

and she emphasises the considerable time implications those challenges pose on teachers in monitoring group dynamics, devising elaborate assessment procedures and finding ways of raising linguistic accuracy.

Felix proposes combining instructivist and constructivist approaches and points to the numerous resources already available on CD-ROM or on the Web,² warning, however, against using CALL merely as a simulation of what might be done in a classroom rather than making use of its added potential for interactivity and connectivity. She proceeds to outline two major trends in online language learning:

- new technologies are used to create learning environments,
 - in which an imaginative teacher can set up authentic learning tasks and collaborative projects;
 - in which processes and goals are stimulating and engaging;
 - which take individual student differences and interests into account;
- teachers take advantage of the latest developments in Intelligent CALL,
 - which allows for the provision of structured online learning activities and sophisticated feedback;

² For language learning online with regard to various languages see Uschi Felix: *Beyond Babel: Language Learning Online*. Melbourne: Language Australia Ltd 2001. Specific reference to German as a Foreign/Second Language can be found in e.g. Hermann Funk & Erwin Tschirner (eds.), "Neue Medien im Deutschunterricht." *Fremdsprache Deutsch*, Heft 21, 2/1999; Markus Biechele, Dietmar Rösler, Stefan Ulrich & Nicola Würffel: *Internet-Aufgaben Deutsch als Fremdsprache*. Stuttgart: Klett 2003; Rösler, Dietmar *E-Learning Fremdsprachen- eine kritische Einführung*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg 2004.

- which contains elements of “technology-as-tutor paradigm”;

and in the subsequent section addresses the issue of catering for oral production skills online.

In the concluding part of her paper, the author stresses that while there is no contention that online learning would replace face-to-face learning, the new technologies offer possibilities for constructivist learning well beyond classroom simulations. Uschi Felix’s contribution to this compilation shows the potential of the new technologies for authentic encounters with the target language and culture and for increased communication between native and non-native speakers, thus pointing to an important new direction in the field of German Studies.