

Hitler, Macbeth, Apfelstrudel und Lieber-Gedichte: my experiences with technologically supported learner autonomy

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Abstract

In this EuroCALL'2005 presentation I reviewed some personal experiences in the use of technology to support autonomy in learning German at the intermediate level in the in-service programme for Adam Mickiewicz University staff. Through micro-observation of my own successes and failures on this path I tried to identify some essential prerequisites, dangers and opportunities for the practical application of the World Wide Web, e-mail, digital video and palmtop software in supporting a highly motivated, pedagogically self-aware and autonomous learner (myself) in a formal setting of a 4-hour-a-week course of German. In terms of language subcomponents, the focus of the presentation was on the acquisition of vocabulary.

0. Introduction

In October 2004 I enrolled in an intermediate level (Mittelstufe) in-service German course for Adam Mickiewicz University staff. My German group counted about 10 learners. The coursebook was "Tangram 2A", Polish edition, published by Max Hueber Verlag in 2002. My reasons to start the course were, in this order: (a) sheer intellectual pleasure (on a year's sabbatical), (b) to test the efficiency of my cognitive skills at fifty years of age, (c) to help me read professional literature in German. In the course of the year I tried a number of ICT props to assist me in building my own, fairly autonomous Deutsch-als-Fremdschprache personal environment.

I later decided to present my experiences at the annual EuroCALL conference, which was organized in 2005 in Cracow. The following is a brief version of my presentation (suffering mostly of the lack of multimedia elements, which were very conspicuous in my Cracow talk).

1. Hitler

As my starting point, and in place of a 'proper' definition, I accepted Jeremy Jones's 2001 appeal: "it is important to accept that CALL can genuinely lead to autonomy, to a state in which learners exercise as much control as possible over the learning process and are as little dependent on the teacher as possible." One opportunity to heed Jones's call presented itself in October 2004, when "Untergang" (*Downfall*) opened in Polish cinemas. Under the influence of this cinematic experience I searched the web for its trailer, watched it many times and tried to understand as much as I could from the colloquial and heavily emotional German featured there. Failing, I looked for the captions, and, with some help from Google, found them on an Italian (!) site:

http://www.leg.it/moderna/hitler_la_disfatta.htm. I brought both the trailer and the captions to class, and we all tried to fill in the remaining blank lines of the dialogues: an excellent listening exercise!

2. Online corpora and concordancers: the case of *schmücken* and *verzieren*

In his 2001 book, Nation urges that: "Learners should be aware of what is involved in knowing a word and should be able to find that information about particular words" (Nation 2001:397). One aspect of knowing a word is "being able to use [it - WS] grammatically correctly in a sentence with suitable collocations" (Nation 2001:397). But how can the learner find out about the "suitable collocations" of a given word? Take *verzieren* and *schmücken*, for example. In my German-Polish dictionary (Chodera & Kubica 1966) the two verbs are practically indistinguishable in their senses (roughly 'embellish'). An otherwise excellent online German-English dictionary (<http://dict.leo.org/>) was also rather unhelpful in that it simply listed a huge number of partly overlapping equivalents. So, would the verbs be close synonyms? Instructed by modern semantics that such cases are very rare, I found the website of the *Institut für Deutsche Sprache* and its excellent (and free) COSMAS (Corpus Search, Management and Analysis System; <http://www.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2/>). I could now search through German texts with tens of millions of words to try to understand the difference between the two verbs. The software produced a concordance arranged by collocation force (LLR) of words surrounding the verbs. And thus, *verzieren*, for example, turned out to be mostly associated with food, as can be seen in figure 1. *Schmücken*, on the other hand, is mostly reserved for other objects which can be embellished. In the process I also learned that *schmücken* is by far the more frequent of the two: 4392 occurrences versus 319 of *verzieren*.

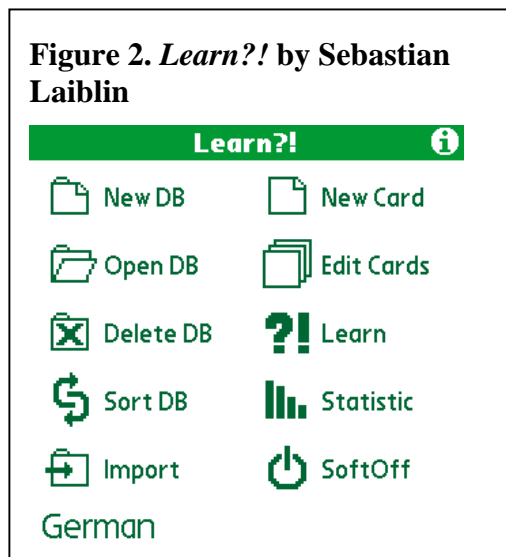
Figure 1. *Verzieren* and its frequent collocates in German

LLR	kumul.	Häufig	Koookkurrenzen	syntagmatische Muster
307	21	21	Lebkuchen	95% Lebkuchen [...] verzieren
201	40	19	Kerzen	94% Uhr Kerzen verzieren für Uhr
87	47	7	bemalen	100% bemalen [und] verzieren
70	53	6	Torten	83% Torten [...] verzieren
48	56	3	geschlagenem	66% geschlagenem Obers verzieren mit
47	57	1	Obers	100% mit Obers verzieren
43	60	3	usw	100% usw verzieren
0	319	259	statistisch unspezifisch	

3. Palmtop GFL software

Another claim of Nation (2001:399) is that "Learners should know how to make the most effective use of direct, decontextualised learning procedures". What Nation has in mind under 'decontextualised learning procedures' is mostly flashcards in their many varieties. Due to its modest software requirements and ease of implementation this technique has been among the first to get ported from the standard PC workstation to the many mobile devices now in growing use, such as palmtops, 'smartphones' and personal organizers. Many of these applications are completely free of charge. I found some running on my own PDA (Palm Tungsten E). Both mobility and cost are important for autonomy, obviously. I could now learn my vocabulary anywhere.

My favourite flash-card application, which I used constantly to practice my German vocabulary was *Learn?!* from Sebastian Laiblin. A screen-dump appears in Figure 2. As can be seen, it has many user options, of which most vital for learner autonomy are: the full editor, five difficulty boxes and sorting.

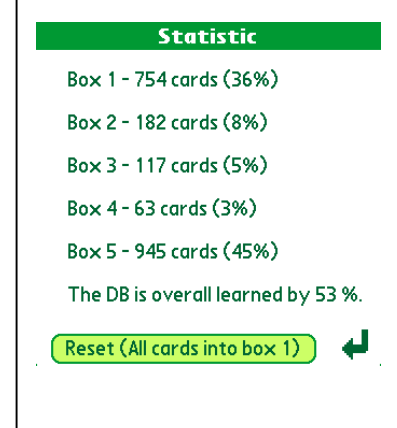


Once a new word is entered in the system it gets promoted to a higher 'box' with every correct answer, and demoted to a lower box with every wrong answer. The many sorting options include: 'shuffle' (to avoid alphabetic prompting), by box (to have easy words first), by hint and flashcard title (to group vocabulary in user-customized ways). I kept a tag on 'hard' words, so I could sort them together, for example. In my 2000-item vocabulary database 'question' was German and 'answer' Polish, so sorting by 'answer' gave me a Polish-German dictionary of sorts.

I used the software for one more purpose, namely to "be aware of, and excited by, [my] progress in vocabulary

learning [...] A record of how many words have been learned should be kept" (Nation 2001:403). *Learn?!*, like all flashcard-based applications, has a bookkeeping function, as seen in Figure 3. To an autonomous learner, with no praise coming from the teacher, it is of course rather uplifting to observe the growing "overall learned" percentage! The resulting motivation to beat one's own result is not to be underrated, either.

Figure 3. Statistics in *Learn?!*



4. Apfelstrudel

According to Nation (2001:400), "Learners need to have the opportunity to meet and learn vocabulary incidentally through [...] extensive reading of material at a suitable level of difficulty". The Internet is widely used in this capacity, of course. At one point I wanted a German recipe for an *Apfelstrudel*: the variety was mind-boggling... I selected one which was at just the right Krashen's I+1 level for me (<http://www.gofeminin.de/w/rezept/r574/apfelstrudel.html>). The very process of selection was of course linguistically useful, not to mention the later work with the text itself. Notice that, thanks to the Internet, I could proceed with this self-chosen task quite autonomously, with no intervention of the teacher or the prescribed textbook. The cake itself, however, was shared in class, to everybody's profound satisfaction :-).

5. Macbeth

One of the hardest tasks for FL autonomous learners is that they "need to know ways to obtain comprehensible input: interacting with learners at a level roughly similar to theirs, interacting with native speakers who are sensitive to their level of knowledge of the language" (Nation 2001:402). How can a learner use ICT to aid him/her in this process? Electronic mail and communicators have now been used for more than a decade in this capacity, both in- and out-of-class. The advent of free internet telephony, such as *Skype*, for example, has created new opportunities in this respect.

Figure 4. *Mistrz* as Macbeth



My own attempts at "interacting with native speakers" of German were rather modest, but quite interesting. Spurred by the self-didactic success of "Der Untergang", I obtained a copy of the 1966 Polish film *Mistrz* ('Master'). The plot of this highly acclaimed film (originally a theatre piece) is set in a cellar of a Nazi-surrounded house in 1944 Poland. Hostages are selected for execution from among two dozen people: only intelligentsia will do for the Nazi officer. An old actor, ausweised as 'Buchhalter' (accountant) must prove that he is indeed a Schauspieler (actor), if he wants to keep his dignity. Challenged to say 'Macbeth' by heart, he does so, in German... He proves his worth and is executed half an hour later.

The old actor claimed that his German Macbeth was a Schiller translation. I wanted some more of the same, so found the relevant web page: http://www.william-shakespeare.de/macbeth_uebersetzung_schiller. But the text I found there was different from what I heard in the film. I quickly discovered two more German translations of this fragment. I was advised to ask the experts about which is the genuine Schiller translation, so on 21 March 2005 I wrote e-mail (in German) to *Deutsches Literaturarchiv*, Marbach am Neckar (www.dla-marbach.de). On the following day I had the answer: "Sehr geehrter Herr Sobkowiak, vielen Dank für Ihre E-Mail vom 21. März 2005. Sie vergleichen verschiedene Übersetzungen von Shakespeares "Macbeth" und fragen, welche von Schiller stammt. Es ist die erste: *Und aufgeschreckt von seinem heulenden Wächter, / Dem Wolf, gleich einem Nachtgespenste, geht / Mit groß - weit - ausgeholten Räuberschritten / Der Mord an sein entsetzliches Geschäft.*"

Thus, thanks to electronic mail and DVD movies, not only could I engage in fruitful e-mail correspondence with a native of German, but also inspect some of the complexities of German translations of Macbeth, all this within a time-span of a few days.

6. Lieber-Gedichte

After the Macbeth-Schiller experiences it was much less stressful to use Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to address my own German teacher and colleagues. The pretext was my interest in *lepieje*, an (untranslatable) genre of light poetry popularized by the Polish 1996 literature Nobel prize winner, Wiesława Szymborska. Somewhat like limericks, they can be used for didactic purposes in a foreign language because they are short and simple. Light poetry in general is of course a common vehicle to use in FLT.

Thus, my first German *Lieber-Gedicht* appeared in my e-mail, where I extolled the potential virtues of this genre in our German class: "Der Wert des 'Lieber' ist darin dass: 1. Er ist sehr kurz und einfach, 2. Der Reim kann auch ziemlich einfach sein (zum Beispiel zwei Verben mit dieselbe Endung), 3. Er kann fantasievoll und lustig sein, 4. Man kann viele benutzbare Wörter üben, 5. 'Lieber' schreiben kann auch als Wettbewerb benutzt werden". The *Lieber* itself was: *Lieber über Hitler lesen, Als, wie Hitler, lang verwesen*. The rhyme to *lesen*, by the way, was found on the German reverse word list at: http://hor.de/dirk_schroeder/woerterliste/ruecklaeufig (not active anymore, as of 31 January 2006). It did not take long for some of my German class-mates to respond with like *Liebers*, and so the CMC in the form of electronic mail continued for some time, in complete autonomy from the classroom procedures. The teacher herself, however, did adopt my idea of using *Lieber* writing as a vehicle of vocabulary teaching with other groups of students, apparently with quite a success.

7. Some conclusions and questions

- Motivation drives autonomy, not vice versa
- Autonomy drives ICT use, not vice versa
- The *Tangram* syllabus was not covered completely
- So what? I had a lot of fun (Deutsch macht mir Spaß!)
- I learned 53% of my vocabulary list (acc. to Learn?!)
- I made myself a rich hypermedia Deutsch environment
- Teacher went along with most of this, despite syllabus
- What drives motivation?
- Where's the limit of teacher involvement in an autonomous student's agenda?
- What about shy students?
- What if there are many autonomous ones?
- ICT problems (e.g. no PDA or WWW)

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