



THE PROJECT WAS SHORTLISTED FOR AN ASCILITE AWARD

Title

Hildes Hexenwelt: Online German for Intermediate Students

(Hilde's Witchy World)

Abstract

Hildes Hexenwelt is an innovative online learning model for intermediate German. Distance education students often experience a sense of isolation and are disadvantaged by the lack of, or at least limited contact with their teacher and "class". This site recognises the importance and motivational force of being able to use the language in communicative and purposeful situations with others, including online speaking. Content has been developed around discrete areas of difficulty at intermediate level. This first module or *learning object* focuses on prepositions. Most activities are based on a constructivist approach which encourages students to collaborate actively with others, share their work, and have input into the learning process and the resource itself.

Discover, Practise, and Play introduce language features in the context of *Hexe Hilde's* world, and provide opportunities to practise and assess the skills gained. Feedback is personalised and intelligent with the aim of helping students to take more responsibility for their learning and guide them to success, rather than merely provide them with correct answers. **Collaborate, Communicate, Belong** and **Show** offer students the opportunity to participate as a member of the community and use their oral and written language skills to collaborate with others in interesting and challenging real-life tasks and projects.

Target Audience

Level 2 German students at Monash University and Year 10 students at the Victorian School of Languages (VSL)

Educational Rationale

This project received ARC funding for the development of a *best-practice model for online language teaching*. While online language learning programs have improved tremendously over the last two years (see Felix 2001), especially through the recognition of the value of constructivist approaches in this environment, and increased interactivity, three important elements are still handled poorly in the majority of current courses. These are (1) providing systematic and meaningful feedback; (2) creating a sense of community and belonging; and (3) catering for the development of oral language skills. This project addresses the fundamental issues related to online pedagogy in the context of these important elements, and includes innovative approaches to solving the problems, including creative use of a voiced bulletin board. It highlights the benefits of server-side feedback structures by showcasing ways of personalising and humanising online learning in a systematic and holistic manner that permeates the total student experience. While engaged in both structured and 'ill-structured' activities, students are made to feel part of a community in which they are interacting and to which they are contributing in a meaningful way.



We believe that the technologies used here offer the potential to overcome the majority of difficulties in online language learning, and that the challenge lies in exploiting their potential to the full. It can be said with some confidence that identifying a single best-practice pedagogical approach for online learning is impossible. After all, important elements in good teaching are the personality of the teacher, the needs of the particular student cohort, and not least the characteristics of the setting in which teaching and learning take place. What is significantly different in our online environment, when compared to a classroom setting, is the fact that we are dealing simultaneously with radically different approaches to providing our students with materials, feedback and opportunities for interaction. On the one hand, we expose learners to reasonably sophisticated automated activities that will engage them in autonomous, predominantly cognitive and metacognitive processes, informed by theory drawing on the work of Gagné (1985). On the other, we exploit the unique opportunities of networked systems to engage students in authentic constructivist learning, in which they interact and collaborate in process-oriented real-life activities, informed by theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1963). Although quite different, the two schools of thought complement each other well in this environment, especially if we take some care to humanise and personalise the former as much as possible within current technological limitations. In contrast to separating computer-assisted language learning activities and interpersonal activities, which is the predominant mode in face-to-face teaching, providing all activities through the same medium, and involving students in the creation of some of these, may well produce a more consistent climate of community and belonging than we find in traditional distance education and perhaps even some classrooms. While we have some evidence to support these claims (see 8 below), to test this bold assertion rigorously will make a rich topic for further research.

Product Description

We have trialled the resource in two distinct ways and settings:

- (1) At Monash University Level Two German students use the materials as an add-on to their face-to-face curriculum.
- (2) At the VSL the resource is used exclusively by students enrolled at intermediate level at a distance.

Students of both groups have been working together on collaborative projects. The choice of the two different modes was quite deliberate since we wanted to find out whether there were major differences between these two groups in terms of motivation, how they interacted with the materials, learning strategies and styles and potential difficulties. The teachers in both settings have taken the role of facilitator and guide, leaving students to explore and master the materials at their own pace, and contribute as much or as little as they wish to the site itself, apart from set pieces of work that must be completed as part of the assessment. We use authentic assessment procedures which reflect the nature of the tasks, i.e. if students have spent a large amount of time on solving an online mystery, the 'test' will be along similar lines. Students have needed very little encouragement to use the online voice facility which has been embraced with great enthusiasm in a variety of ways. To be able to submit an assignment in a multimodal manner, i.e. text,



accompanied by voice and/or graphics has been found extremely useful for both students and teachers (more below).

Educational Innovation

This is the first online language learning resource which is predominantly based on constructivist pedagogy. Furthermore, this is the first attempt to include the use of online audio recording in innovative and pedagogically sound ways. A major innovation is the inclusion of co-operative projects between tertiary and secondary students of the same language proficiency. While the combination of these groups arose incidentally out of the requirements for the ARC application, it has provided us with valuable insights into complementary learning styles of these groups (see below). The resource also provides more intelligent feedback than has hitherto been the case, including extensive use of graphics for reinforcing structural points and for personalising the learning experience. The witch *Hilde* acting as a tutor-companion feedback device changes the entire dynamics and climate of this online course. She adds a personal dimension to interacting with a program that appears to add interest and curiosity and communicates humour and enthusiasm. The construct also helps in the creation of a larger and more varied repertoire of automated responses. *Hilde* who is young and quirky has her own special vocabulary which represents how German teenagers communicate these days. She can smile with approval or look puzzled and give hints on how to improve an incorrect response, appear as a contestant in a game show, and be the one to whom assignments are being sent.

Evaluation

Extensive evaluation was based on a previous study (Felix 2000) in which data was collected from participating students by questionnaires and observational procedures.

- Students completed three questionnaires at certain stages during their studies.
- Students were observed and interviewed (captured on videos) while interacting with the materials. (Video tape is available on request).
- Students were asked to keep logbooks detailing their learning strategies while working with the materials.

Outcomes:

- Students mastered the grammatical items faster than can normally be expected at that level. According to both students and teachers this was the result of the use of graphics and hints and more time spent on task.
- The majority of students appeared more highly motivated than in traditional settings to engage in sophisticated collaborative tasks - producing work of respectable levels of proficiency.

This was especially true for the oral activities where the distance students contributed significantly more than they would normally via audio-tapes or phone conversations.



The playful environment appears to have contributed to this as well as the opportunity to carry out work anonymously, reducing language anxiety. This was equally true for older and younger students.

- Both students and teachers appreciated the increased IT literacy gained. Students felt significantly more comfortable using the technologies at the end of the evaluation period (this was especially so for the tertiary students).
- Valuable co-operation between the tertiary and secondary students arose out of their complementary strength in different learning skills. The older students were able to help with metaskill information, while the younger students often helped with IT skills.

Project Manager

Professor Uschi Felix

Project Personnel, Roles and Contributions to project

The main project team includes Mr Stefo Stojanovski (co-ordinator at the VSL), Jennifer Saynor-Locke (content & graphics) and Norma Lopata (e-learning application design and development).

Research and Development assistants have been Sue Cooney, David Askew, Stefanie Everke, André Bevez and Judith Bothroyd. Interface graphical and technical design by Peter Stagg, technical assistance on Wimba by Anthony Richardson.

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