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Leveraging OER for increased student motivation and learner autonomy

Bio data

Robert Godwin-Jones is Professor of World Languages and International Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. His research is principally in applied linguistics, in the areas of language learning and technology, and intercultural communication. He has published 4 books, multiple articles and book chapters, and writes a regular column for *Language Learning & Technology* on emerging technologies.

Abstract

A modular electronic textbook can provide the flexibility lacking in print textbooks to accommodate local needs as well as varying student personal and professional interests. I will be presenting an action research project, involving creation and use of a modular e-book for intermediate language learning. It features modules developed in house as well as OER taken from other sources. The multimedia and reading content includes topics from a variety of disciplines and language contexts. The grammar modules are designed for self-study, with explanations, examples, and exercises, so as to accommodate a flipped classroom approach. Whenever appropriate, modules incorporate local or programmatic interests, such as a module on the city in which the departmental study abroad program is located. To further learner autonomy and metalinguistic skills, the e-book includes modules on the use of online language tools and services. In an effort to customize further the content options, as well as to enhance student motivation, students are asked to find and report on online resources (as possible future modules), through a course blog. Students keep learner journals so as to reflect on and document their progress in the target language, and on their own informal learning experiences.

Conference paper

Introduction
A modular electronic textbook/workbook can provide the flexibility lacking in print textbooks to accommodate local needs as well as varying student interests and proficiency levels. This is of particular relevance at the intermediate level, as at that point students have achieved sufficient proficiency to be able to use the target language in a greater variety of contexts. At the tertiary level in the US, this is often the point at which many students end their formal language training, as they complete a foreign language requirement. At my university that requirement ends with a fourth-semester course. In order to encourage students to continue learning the target language, this expiring extrinsic motivator needs to be replaced by intrinsic motivation. I will be discussing an action research project, aiming to restructure an intermediate German course through creation and use of an e-textbook. The goal is to motivate students towards further language study, in a class or on their own,

through the use of learning materials of potential personal or professional interest. Guidance towards learner autonomy is provided through modules on online learning resources for German and on strategies for language learning generally.

Project context
Optimally, we want our students to develop sufficient interest in learning the target language so as to see its usefulness for personal or professional growth. Students who are intrinsically motivated tend to be better language learners, using deeper processing strategies (Oxford et al., 2014). Getting students to that point can prove difficult, with individual motivation being necessary but not sufficient (Reinders & White, 2011). Making the connection to the learners' future selves may be aided by allowing students to learn through materials connected to their individual preferences (Griffiths, 2013). Students' living environment may be a motivating factor, if target language use is needed for day-to-day living. In the context of this project, students are learning German in an environment in which they are unlikely to encounter the language spoken locally. In that way, learning German is quite different from learning Spanish in the US. In fact, German as a foreign language is struggling in the US to survive in schools and universities (Ecke, 2011). Given this situation, leading students to make connections with the language and its speakers electronically is an important task for German teachers, as it is for teachers of less-commonly taught languages (Godwin-Jones, 2013).

An important component of encouraging learner motivation and enabling learner autonomy is helping students to develop effective strategies for language learning (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). Learner training is particularly needed in the largely monolingual US context, in which only 10% of citizens can use a second language well (Commission, 2016). American students, even those who have achieved a novice level in a second language, tend to have "folklinguistic" ideas about language and language learning, emphasizing the primacy of vocabulary learning and grammar study (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995). We know that as students advance in language proficiency, formal, grammar-based practice strategies become less effective, and need to be supplemented by active social use strategies (Oxford et al., 2014). Most successful are those students who search out methods that work for them individually, developing into independent language learners (Benson, 2013), a process often happening outside the formal learning setting and without the help of the textbook. A study of ESL textbooks by Reinders & Balçikanli (2011) found that "textbooks do little to foster learner autonomy, and that when they do, they offer limited opportunity for practice to students" (p. 265). The situation is no different for German. It has been increasingly recognized that, given the situation, it falls largely to the teacher to help guide students towards becoming autonomous learners (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014).

Research context
The design of the experimental e-textbook is based on classroom practice and local needs, informed by research in the following areas:
   A) Best practices in materials development for language learning (Tomlinson, 2016)
   B) Design optimization for OER (Butcher, 2015)
   C) Effective and motivating language learning strategies (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014).
The project will be presented within those contexts.

A) Materials development
There are a number of advantages to an open, electronic textbook over a print textbook. Electronic resources can be updated regularly, can grow over time, and can offer a potentially wider selection of content (including remedial and advanced learning materials). They can also easily incorporate media and interactivity, as well as include other open resources. Ideally, the content is presented in a modular format, which allows users to

select only those items of personal interest. This kind of modularity is important in OER intended to be shared (Dixon & Hondo, 2014). More flexibility in use is enabled if the resources can be edited. OER for language learning have the potential to fit the characteristics of optimal language materials development outlined by Tomlinson and Masuhura (2011): "ongoing, dynamic, and experiential" (p. 251). Recent studies of OER have indicated that student reception is largely positive, with students not only appreciating the lower cost over commercial textbooks, but also the option of content customization tailored to local conditions (Hilton, 2016; Islim, Koybasi & Cagiltay, 2016; Prasad, Totaram & Usagawa, 2016).

The experimental e-text was developed specifically for our fourth-semester German course, "Intermediate German Readings". For many years, the course used a popular reader, *Der Weg zum Lesen* (Vail & Sparks, 1991), and most recently a more communicative oriented text, *Stationen* (Augustyn & Euba, 2014). In the case of the former, readings are taken exclusively from short stories by 20th-century authors, while the latter contains both literary and cultural texts. The goal of the e-text is to provide a wider range of topics and text types, in order to accommodate individual preferences and to expose students to different styles and language registers. In this particular course, out of the typically 25 students enrolled, only a handful are likely to be German majors, with the rest representing a variety of academic areas, ranging from art history to physics.

The modules developed represent authentic language use, i.e., materials intended for native speakers. Sources used, such as the *Deutsche Welle* and the German Wikipedia, provide copyright-free or permissible educational use. The texts have been annotated (for both linguistic and cultural information), and supplied with comprehension questions and exercises. The topics range from everyday culture to science, represent a variety of genres from fairy tale to technical treatise, and are of varying levels of difficulty. Whenever feasible, they integrate language with culture. A series of four modules, for example, explores fast-food in Germany, with topics such as *Döner Kebab* and multiculturalism (Figure 1).

Typisch Deutsch: Döner Kebab
Kurztexte zum Deutschlernen

Seite: 1 | 2 | 3 | 4   Punkte   alles drucken

Hier zu lernen?

Neue Vokabeln

die Beilage, -n
side dish

Sprache & Kultur

Passive voice

Foretaste given in this lesson of the passive, which consists of the verb 'werden' as helping verb, plus the main verb in the past particple [Das Haus wird gesrichen - The house is being painted.]

In dieser Einheit

- 3 Texte
- 5 Fragen
- Circa 50 Minuten
- Lernniveau: A2 (Mittelstufe)

Einstieg: Ein deutsches Gericht?

Der Döner Kebab typisch deutsch? Ist er nicht türkisch? Ja, **ursprünglich** kommt das **Gericht** aus der Türkei, aber heute kann man überall in Deutschland Döner finden. Neben Hamburger und Currywurst ist Döner eines der beliebtesten Fast Food Gerichte in Deutschland.

Haben Sie eine **Ahnung**, was Döner Kebab ist und wie er **vorbereitet wird**? Aus welchen Fleisch? Mit welchen **Zutaten**?

Kennen Sie... Kebab **es**...

Lesen Sie...

vorberetet wird

prepared

*Note that this is werden used as a helping verb (**wird**) together with the past participle (**vorbereitet**) to construct the passive voice. You will be seeing other passive constructions in this lesson with this same pattern.*

*Mistakes were made. = Fehler **wurden gemacht.***

*In English we use the verb to be as the helping verb for the passive, but in German **werden** is used.*

nach oben | nächste Seite

Figure 1: Sample reading

Most modules were developed in-house but some incorporate OER developed elsewhere. A text by Albert Einstein, for example, comes from the University of Canterbury Learning Objects for German (http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/lc/opencourseware/glo/german-lo.html). When possible, audio and video are integrated into the modules. In some cases, this is the starting point. The fast-food module on *Currywurst*, for example, begins with a popular song about the dish. The text, written in Rhineland dialect, represents an area in which an expandable e-text offers an advantage over conventional textbooks, namely the ability to incorporate language variation. This is of particular interest in teaching German, given the variety and distinctiveness of German dialects, as well as the typical absence of exposure to linguistic diversity in textbooks. Using online resources supplements and expands on the language used by the instructor and offers opportunities for students to encounter actual language use in a variety of contexts (Azimova & Johnston, 2012).

The e-text incorporates grammar tutorials, presented in the students' L1 (English), so as to be usable at all levels. These modules are intended primarily as reference materials, but they offer self-correcting practice exercises and "quick check" formative assessments. The tutorials cover the topics typically taught in this course, geared towards constructions often encountered in reading German (passive voice, indirect discourse subjunctive), but also

include topics covered in first-year courses, as well as some introduced in the third-year sequence. The content for the tutorials comes from in-house development and from open-access resources such as COERLL (http://www.coerll.utexas.edu).

B) OER design
In an OER project such as this, created with local needs and conditions as the foremost design factor, it is likely that only some materials will be of interest for others to use. One of the modules, for instance, is designed to acquaint students with the city in which our summer study abroad program is housed, Vienna, as well as to characteristics of Austrian German. Interest in this and other modules on Austrian language and culture will depend on programmatic priorities. Making connections to programmatic considerations can provide useful promotional benefits. The German program at Michigan State University supplemented their intermediate-level textbook with cultural lessons tied to their study abroad programs, resulting in a substantial increase in study abroad participation as well as in the number of German majors (Goertler, 2015).

It may be the case that others would want to make changes to the modules, such as shortening the text, adding notes, or providing other media. Making OER content editable requires several steps (Butcher, 2015). First, the content needs to be licensed so as to allow for derivative works. Second, it needs to be shared on a searchable repository. Third, the materials need to be in an editable form that is nonproprietary. Rather than using PDF, as is often the case in OER, it's preferable to provide content in a format such as RTF, which can be imported into any text editor. For this project, materials are tagged with the Creative Commons share-alike license and are shared through Merlot. As the material includes audio and video clips as well as interactive elements (in formats such as multiple answer, drag-and-drop, ordering, and matching), HTML was used, creating web-based content. Those files, along with associated JavaScript and CSS files, are in unencrypted plain text, so are freely editable. That could be done manually, or more easily, by loading the content into an HTML editor.

One of the advantages of using an HTML editor is the ability to export the content in different formats. One option available in many editors today is to export the content as an LTI package (https://www.imsglobal.org/activity/learning-tools-interoperability). This allows content to be integrated into an LMS such as Moodle. Student interactions with the content (how many times accessed, for how long, with what assessment scores, etc.) are recorded in the LMS gradebook. This kind of functionality can be quite useful in supplying the kind of flexible content choices built into the design of this project. Reading assignments, for example, might involve choosing one or more among a number of different content options, with completion scores based on length and difficulty of the texts. A mastery score is assigned, with a variety of options for achieving a passing grade. This is a goal for this project not yet achieved, as it necessitates having available a larger number of texts, one of the major targeted enhancements to the project.

C) Learning strategies
Several approaches are used in this project to motivate students and to help them develop effective language learning and maintenance strategies. Those include, as described below:
    1) Incorporating into the modules the knowledge and skills involved in using online resources for learning German, to help in developing learner autonomy (Oxford, 2011)
    2) Including students themselves in the selection of texts for modules, given the usefulness in motivational learning strategies of "activities consciously chosen by learners" (Griffiths, 2013, p. 36)
    3) Aiding students in developing metalinguistic knowledge about language learning, thereby leading them to become more efficient learners (van Lier, 2014)

4) Making materials available in mobile-friendly formats for more personalized learning (Reinders & White, 2011)

1) Integrated into the course content is an extensive set of annotated links to German language learning tools and services. Those include online resources such as dual language language dictionaries, spell/grammar checkers, and self-assessment sites. Class sessions include hands-on practice using such resources with the course materials, having students, for example, try out on-the-fly text annotators such as Globefish Instant Translator (https://sites.google.com/site/globefishtools/). In addition, tutorials on online tools are assigned for completion outside of class; these include a module on the effective use of Google Translate for English to German translation and another featuring a walk-through of open, online proofing tools for German (Figure 2).
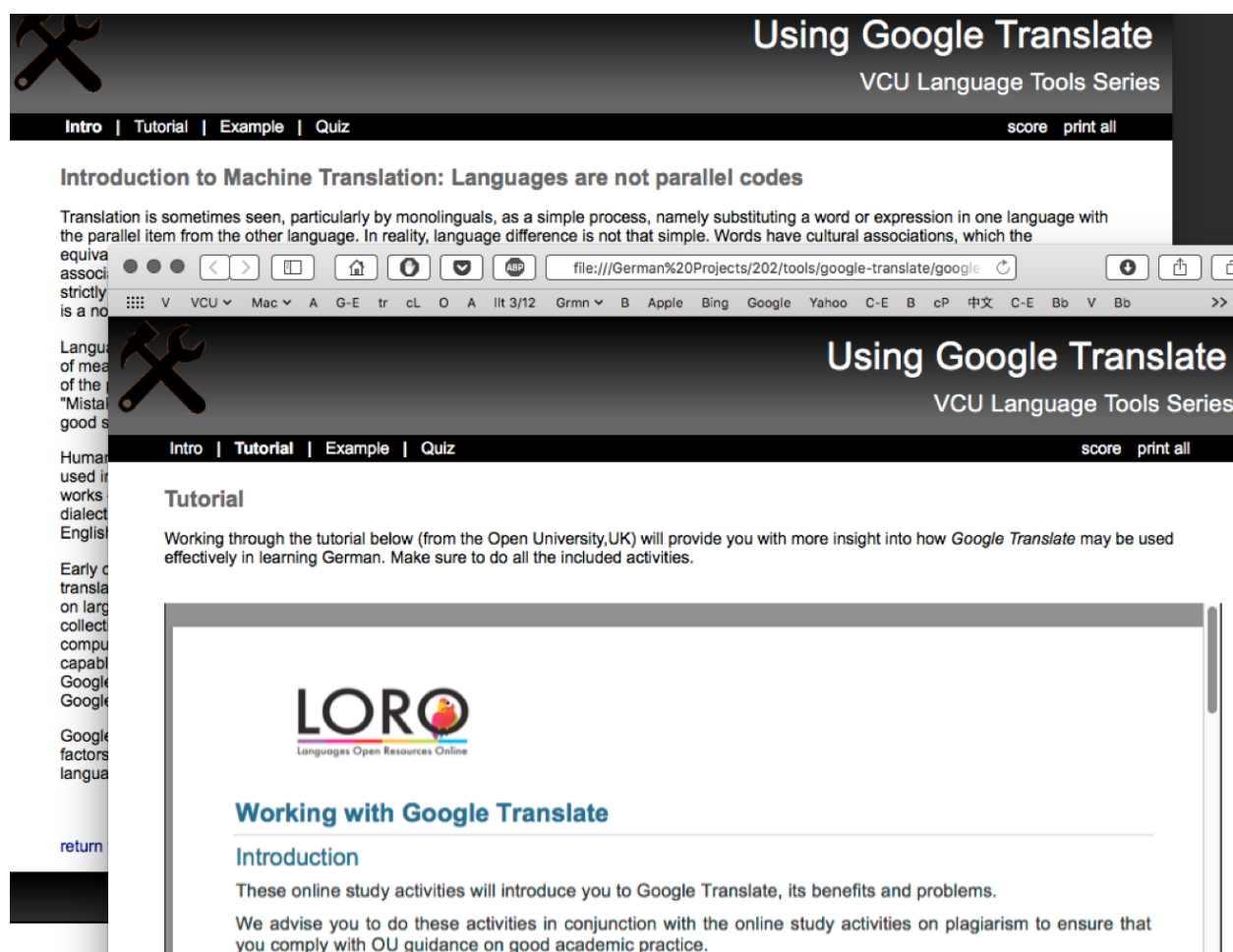

Figure 2: Sample module on online tools, integrating content from LORO
(http://loro.open.ac.uk)

2) A recently added component to the course is a resource curation blog. Students find and describe online resources in German related either to course content, or to their own personal interests or professional goals. Suggested starting points for finding appropriate resources are supplied, but students are free to search on their own. Students are required to provide at least two curations and also to give a brief in-class presentation in German on the resources they have curated. Students are asked to review and rate each

other's posts. Those resources with the highest ranking are targeted for development as learning modules for subsequent cohorts. The curation project will thus add to the scope of the e-text, while providing students with an opportunity to gain hands-on practice with finding and describing potential online learning materials. The aim is to engage students as stakeholders in "participatory action research" (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002).

3) While the specific focus of the course and the accompanying e-text is on the development of German language proficiency, an additional goal is to equip students with online language learning strategies, so as to be of assistance in learning new languages in the future. Whenever feasible, information is built into the modules about associated language learning tools or strategies. For example, for each of the readings, a set of keywords and expressions is supplied and assigned to be learned, practiced in online exercises and assessed in quizzes. To aid students in retention, a web-based flashcard app was developed. The app provides the basic functionality normally available in electronic flashcards, but adds features pointing towards best practices in vocabulary learning (Ellis, 2002). Each item displayed is directly linked to an online concordancing tool (Linguee, http://linguee.com), so that students see the word used in context and are introduced to the practical use of accessing language corpora. The app includes an editor, which allows students to edit or add items, as well as to export the list to a third-party flashcard app such as Memrise (http://memrise.com), which features spaced repetition algorithms, visual memory aids, and game-like competitions. Enabling export/import allows students to customize the vocabulary they learn as well as to create cumulative vocabulary stacks. In the process, students learn about vocabulary retention strategies and try out tools of potential usefulness for subsequent language learning.

4) Reinders & White (2011) point to the affordances of new technologies in helping develop learner autonomy, with a special reference to the advantages of mobile technologies. The modules in this project are created using responsive design, with content display and functionality automatically adjusted to screen size. In addition, texts are available as e-books (packaged as ePub 3), allowing for off-line access, as well as use of built-in e-reader features such as bookmarking, note-taking, and integrated dictionaries. Finally, the modules (and other course materials) are made available in a mobile-friendly "course companion", accessible on the open web. This is a single HTML file functioning as a web app, savable to students' mobile home screens for quick access on the go (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Course companion with flashcard app

Conclusion

The modules discussed here (annotated readings/media, interactive tutorials, associated glossaries/exercises) supplied the primary course content, but were not the only learning components. Although the major emphasis in the course is on development of reading ability, in-class and out-of class activities featured extensive listening and speaking practice. That included regular small group Skype conversation sessions, as well as assignments for students to connect in oral and written formats with other speakers through tandem learning and other services. As a means to encourage reflection through narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, 2011), students maintained journals in which they chronicled their learning experiences, both related to the course and to out-of-class, informal learning. Writing prompts asked students to reflect on their experiences with specific course activities as well as with the e-text. Students in their journals, and in course evaluations, reacted favorably to the use of the e-text, with several citing increased motivation for learning German. Not all comments were enthusiastic; one student expressed a preference for "paper and pen" over online materials.

It seems inevitable that the use of digital language learning materials will increase, with students becoming more familiar and comfortable with their use, particularly as they become integrated into all learning levels. The setting today for situated language learning (Gee, 2004) is for many learners the Internet. As electronic resources become increasingly normalized in instructed language learning (Bax, 2003), this will have a significant impact on materials creation for language learners, as Chapelle comments (2010):

> The historically-constructed line between applied linguists who work in CALL and those who produce other forms of language learning materials is difficult to maintain and not very useful. In a sense, today almost anyone who is working on materials for classroom language learning is working in CALL. This vertical spread of CALL and the considerable activity surrounding its development and evaluation prompts reconsideration of all language learning materials. (p. 67).

The project discussed here presents one example of this kind of merger of CALL and materials development. The e-text is shared as OER in order to make available to students all learning materials after the course is completed and, in fact, after they have left the university. There is no certainty that students will need or want later access. However, the content is available, something less likely if learning materials are supplied through an LMS. Learning a language other than German may well factor into students' futures. If so, this project may provide a helpful practical experience in using online resources for language study, as well as supplying a set of learning strategies as starting points towards becoming autonomous language learners.

CALL in Context

As outlined in the paper, the action research project described (creation of a modular, open e-textbook for intermediate-level German – roughly CEFR B1) is based on classroom practice and local needs, informed by research in the following areas: materials development, OER design, language learning strategies, learner motivation, and learner autonomy (see references in paper).

The project addresses the conference questions related to…

   1) *Local context shaping the design of the learning environment*: The design of the e-text was developed in response to specific issues in the German program, namely the desire to have more students continue with their study of the language (formally or informally) after completing the language requirement. This led to a need for more flexible course content to demonstrate a range of disciplinary uses of German as well as to accommodate personal interests (such as sports, music, politics). This is much easier to accomplish using a modular, electronic format for content delivery. The integration of online resources helps guide students towards becoming more informed and independent language learners.

   2) *Technologies affording context-dependent enrichment and personalization*: The-text offers students personal choice in reading selections, with some content available for user customization. Students themselves contribute (through a materials curation blog) to content selection for modules. Additionally, content is mobile-friendly (HTML authored with responsive design, modules also available in e-book format), inviting students to integrate use of the learning resources into their personal, everyday lives.

3) *Context-dependency of OER*: The e-text is modular, allowing for mix and match usage, with the modules designed in response to the profiles of the students in terms of disciplinary interests, proficiency levels, and metalinguistic knowledge.

4) *Role of technology in contextualization of the learning process*: Web-based interactive exercises and customizable tools such as a web flashcard app can be adapted to user preferences and proficiency levels. Learning materials are accompanied whenever feasible by contextual information on language learning strategies.

The project has been designed to address the following interconnected local issues:

- Students at the intermediate level at my institution represent a variety of disciplines. Very few students continue language study after the language requirement is fulfilled (in our case 4 semesters) because they see no relevance to their personal or aspiring professional selves

- The majority of our students are monolinguals and tend to have simplistic and unhelpful views on how language works and how to go about learning a second language

- Because we have used standard language textbooks in our classes, there is typically little exposure to the realities of actual language use, i.e. language variation (dialects, registers, texting vs. blogging) or language pragmatics

- As their use is not normally discussed in class, students use online language tools (such as Google Translate) naively, not with critical understanding of affordances and limitations

- Consequently, students don't gain the knowledge and skills in the use of online language learning services/tools that will assist in learning new languages in the future for personal or professional reasons

- Because of the perceived need to follow a fixed curriculum using a standard textbook, students who may have acquired language skills informally often do not see their language gains valued or acknowledged in the classroom

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