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German as a foreign language

Foreign language learning with the new media:

**Between the sanctuary of the classroom and the open
terrain of natural language acquisition**

Dietmar Rösler, Gießen

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In this article I will discuss the importance of the new media for foreign language learning in four steps.

- Step one will look at changes in foreign language learning brought about by the advent of the new media.
The second and third steps belong, today at least, to two different realms of science fiction:
- Step two briefly addresses how the internet could be used in co-operative development of teaching material - there are no technical elements of science fiction here, the futuristic element lies in the organisation of the production and distribution of teaching material.
- Step three, on the other hand, is proper science fiction: I will ask whether natural language acquisition could be imitated in an artificial virtual world of the target language and culture and whether this would actually be a desirable development.
- Step four, finally, returns to the real world to take a look at a successful internet reading course provided by the Goethe-Institut.

This article will neither cover the development of CALL software¹ nor address the question as to whether a new paradigm of foreign language learning has evolved as a result of the new media and of constructivist thinking. The former won't be covered due to lack of space – even a publication in the WWW has to set its limits not because of lack of volume but out of consideration for the reader. The latter simply doesn't interest me: whether a new paradigm evolves or not is something which the history of the subject has to determine in fifty years time or more, discussions about it now can only be regarded as another example of the growing trend of research being replaced by academic marketing.

1. How CD-ROM, email and the WWW can compensate for some of the shortcomings of classroom based foreign language learning

The key question for me in the debate about the role of the new media in foreign language learning is: (How) Do the new media contribute towards enhancing successful natural learning within what, for want of a better alternative, I will continue to call foreign language learning in the classroom²? Sweeping statements about how textbooks are being replaced by 'authentic' telecommunication, assumptions about autonomous learners which haven't taken into account the constraints of learning in educational institutions, and declarations about the the role of the

¹ Cf. Hess (1998) for an empirical analysis of the effectiveness of CALL software as part of the German as a foreign language component of a university degree course.

² even though part of the discussion on the role of the new media is about rethinking the concept of the foreign language classroom itself (cf. Legutke 1997).

teacher being solely that of a facilitator, all these undermine³ a differentiated discussion about what the new media can contribute to the individualization of learning processes within the classroom and about how a productive balance can be created between the function of the classroom as a didactic sanctuary and the exciting challenges of autonomous and discovery learning⁴.

Different media play a different role in integrating aspects of natural learning into the classroom. CD-ROM teaching material is as producer oriented as the current printed textbooks. The fact that a CD-ROM offers multimedia presentations of its contents and hypertextual access makes it a good medium for conveying information on clearly defined subjects, for example on certain *Landeskunde* topics which do not require up-to-the-minute information. In these cases a CD-ROM may be of greater value than the WWW with its inherently chaotic searches and representations. Teaching material on CD-ROM does, however, share the main weakness of current printed and cassette based teaching material: its contents and - despite the seemingly interactive interface - ultimately the study path of the learner too is predetermined by the producers of the CD-ROM.

The content is hardly ever predetermined where electronic mail is utilized for foreign language purposes. Emails are texts on the border between verbal and written language. Written and read, they nonetheless display many of the characteristics of spoken language in terms of choice of register and the high tolerance of mistakes.

The 1:1 relationship in language learning, traditionally in the form of individual tuition in the interaction between a teacher and a learner, calling to mind the language masters of former centuries and which today is usually only to be found in private schools is, with the advent of email, once again gaining ground. It has re-established itself at the end of the twentieth century, beyond the affluent private pupil scenario, in the form of alternative co-operative concepts, learning partnerships such as the Tandem set-up, in which two individuals with different mother tongues alternate the role of teacher – or to be more precise, that of the language and culture expert – and learner⁵. Tandem learning has now, per email⁶, become a

³ This is in itself a sweeping statement. It is based on a detailed discussion of the problems associated with the claims of learner autonomy in the context of the new media in Rösler 1998.

⁴ For a differentiated approach to autonomous foreign language learning cf. Little (1994).

⁵ Cf. Estevez et al. (1989) for a description of Tandem learning and how it can be made part of a language course.

⁶ Cf. e.g. <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de> and Little/Brammerts (1996).

place of learning which transcends the necessarily shared location in the original Tandem concept. In contrast to the classical Tandem, using email Tandem means that the communication is written and asynchronous, a bonus in a learning and teaching situation, in which the enthusiasm for communicative language teaching often permits the pendulum to swing too far to the side of spoken language; the functional communicative writing in emails can enable it to be swung some way back towards the other side.

Giving a learner the possibility to interact directly with a native speaker from the target culture is one common use of email in foreign language learning, but it is certainly not the only one. Email can also be used as a speedy variation of the old idea of class correspondence and even for rather complex co-operations between groups of learners in different cultural environments⁷. It can also play a part in teacher training: Tamme & Rösler (1999) describe how a 1:1 email tuition for Chinese students of German as a foreign language was introduced into the training of future teachers of German at Gießen university.

Email can overcome some of the constraints of classroom-based learning by providing a channel for real and speedy interaction between learners and native speakers in the target language. But, as always, the medium is not the message because if people have nothing to say to each other then it doesn't really make any difference in which medium they don't say it.

This difficulty persists for all teachers and all learners, it won't go away by simply replacing conversation classes by chat rooms and letters by emails.

While CD-ROMs are probably best used for information retrieval of *Landeskunde* activities and are less suited as material for a complete *ab initio* language course, and while the advantage of email and chat rooms lies clearly in their providing swift contact between learners or between learners and tutors, the use of the internet is more varied. It offers different possibilities for those involved in foreign language learning:

⁷ Cf. the discussion of processes of intercultural learning during an email based joint study of a literary text by groups of Canadian and German pupils in Müller-Hartmann (1999).

- up-to-the-minute⁸ information on the target language and culture which hasn't been produced specifically for language students and which is just there to be listened to, read or looked at,
- aids needed for language learning such as grammars or dictionaries,
- attempts to compile and adapt for language learning purposes the data available in the internet,
- so-called chat rooms in which people can communicate directly with one another,
- foreign language learning material which has been produced specifically for the internet and
- forums in which teachers and learners can communicate with one another about teaching and learning.

The use of teaching material in the internet or of sites relevant for teachers is becoming a commonplace activity. The Goethe-Institut server for instance, which currently consists of around 23,000 WWW pages⁹, registered about 32,500 visits per day in January 2000, which is slightly more than a million visits that month. Assuming that each user calls up five pages on average, then the Goethe-Institut site is currently being visited by about 6,500 people every day¹⁰.

2. Could the internet provide the framework for co-operative production of learning and teaching material?

The internet supports both centralizing and decentralizing activities at the same time and thus could facilitate the collection and provision of good teaching and learning ideas which, taken from the world-wide diversity of classroom experiences, could be used in adapted form for concrete situations in specific places without a limiting, centralized teaching model being imposed. One could even imagine the entire future production of teaching material being altered thoroughly by this possibility of simultaneous centralizing and decentralizing.

⁸ Regular users of the internet despairing about ancient sites will know that *up-to-the-minute* is often wishful thinking rather than fact. Part of the problem of integrating the internet into language learning is that, in contrast to a well-made textbook or CD-ROM, the reliability of any given site is never guaranteed. Language learning which uses the internet therefore has to enable learners to cope with this insecurity and find ways of assessing the quality and credibility of a text. Cf. Rösler (1998).

⁹ 3,700 of these deal with internal matters.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Klaus Brehm, Goethe-Institut München, who provided this information.

It would be possible, with the help of databases of existing teaching material cut up into small units and interlinked, to exploit all the current material on offer and, at the same time, be able to establish exactly where the genuine deficits are, where writing new material and feeding it into the database would be really worthwhile and not simply a case of reinventing the wheel. This could stimulate the development of a multitude of teaching and learning material of various national, regional and other specific adaptations and variations, of different approaches to topics at varying stages of progression and with references to different social, geographical and cultural backgrounds, all linked with a variety of classroom activities. Texts which weren't originally written for language learning could also be integrated, together with suggestions of how to deal with them and linked with teachers' forums supporting classroom activities.

This vision of a pool of teaching material contrasts sharply with the real virtual world in which many search but few find what they are looking for, in which aborted attempts and material of doubtful didactic value can be found side by side with good ideas, and in which the question of assessment and quality control is still in its infancy, despite hopeful indications such as certain hompages developing a trustworthy reputation for the links they provide to quality sites.

Despite this reality it is an open question whether teacher training seminars will be able to pool their resources in order to prevent the huge waste of parallel production and adaptation of material, and whether publishers and authors of teaching material will be able to anticipate this development and will create appropriately empty spaces which can then be developed in a decentralized fashion¹¹.

3. Science fiction: natural learning in an artificial environment

Will learners who are physically outside the target language area nonetheless one day, thanks to virtual reality, be able to learn the language in a quasi-natural, rich linguistic environment, structured in such a way that they experience few of the disadvantages which can be associated with natural second language learning? Can natural foreign language learning outside the target language area be boosted by a progression from tele-vision and tele-hearing to tele-experience? Two different versions of tele-experience in foreign language learning¹² present themselves.

¹¹ This is only a very rough sketch. For a more detailed description of a pool of teaching material cf. Rösler (1999).

¹² For further possibilities and a more detailed look at the two which are presented here cf. Rösler at press.

On the one side is a combination of chat rooms and current virtual worlds, on the other is a purely artificial version, the realisation of which is, from today's perspective, pure science fiction and whose desirability might even be questionable.

The first version is a tele-experience from real person to real person mediated by avatars who represent them. In this model, learners as avatars in a virtual learning world can adopt any role they want, they can change their regional origin, their social class or their gender just as they can alter the outer appearance of 'their' artificial figure. All the questions which make this form of communication in chat rooms or virtual worlds so interesting for its non-language learner users apply here too: What is my self, who is my opposite number in cyberspace? How can I communicate with partners whose identities are constantly changing? These questions about identity, which are as difficult to answer as they are exciting for those who playfully enter a virtual world, become a problem when this form of communication is functionalized for the purposes of institutionalized foreign language learning. Will there be any elements of cultural context or intercultural understanding left in this type of interaction or will the arbitrariness of identities lead to the exclusion of anything which is 'difficult' and could disturb or even interrupt the flow of communication; will anything which gets in the way of smooth communication be eliminated? Will the result be a kind of lowest common denominator, a McTalk?

The second version is pure science-fiction and plays with the paradox of completely artificial natural communication. It is the most exciting and most problematic model of foreign language learning per virtual reality, one which won't hit the market within the near future - if indeed it ever does – and one which avoids all the problems which can arise when native speakers of the target language and learners of that language communicate in an institutionalized context by providing a complete and complex cyberscript which constantly gives the learners the feeling that they are participating in a natural tele-experience, although they are, in fact, in the middle of a classroom setting, the like and the scope of which has never been seen or imagined before. In this model, all the participants communicating in the virtual world, apart from the learners themselves, all the cultural information, every form of behaviour, each moment of intercultural misunderstanding, of joy etc. is completely scripted. The world that the learners 'enter' is either populated by artificial figures in artificial spaces or else by live actors and authentic original sounds recorded in scenes which were shot like those in a foreign language learning film. The learners move seemingly freely in a target language environment, which reacts appropriately to their linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour; in it people are amused by their lack of

background knowledge or help them out with information, are either friendly or not, and so on. The complex script reacts in a quasi natural way to what the learners say and do, it isn't a film which is being shown, the learners themselves are part of it.

I don't, at this juncture, wish to address the ethical and moral questions which are automatically raised by the idea of such total manipulation, instead I would like to position this model in the didactic discussion. In the context of institutionalized foreign language learning outside the target language area – and it is only this situation I am talking about, as the target language area itself offers different possibilities for linguistic interaction – two basic problems dominate: How can learners be involved in meaningful interaction in the target language? And how can the target language and culture be represented in a comprehensive and differentiated manner? As far as involving learners in interaction in the target language is concerned, foreign language teaching has frequently both prematurely and inaccurately announced that a solution has been found – one only has to remember how complex simulations or even simple role-playing in the classroom were proclaimed to be natural communication.

As far as its material base is concerned, foreign language learning has moved from textbooks to storing material on tapes, cassettes and videos and linking these with the textbooks, it has moved on to CDs and is now using material from the internet. A multitude of forms of material has emerged which depart ever further from the notion that a textbook could or should determine the entire learning process. Instead, the idea of the textbook as a quarry has gained ground and, with it, the textbook itself has retreated in the face of the movement towards learning in partnership in situations of genuine communication. From this vantage point, the notion of artificially creating natural communication in cyberspace would seem to be a step backwards, didactically speaking, because it would be creating nothing less than a giant textbook, based on the principle of simulation. But this assessment doesn't take into account that such a cyberspace endeavour no longer suffers, as traditional textbooks did, from the (unavoidable) reduction of having to select elements of the target culture according to a linguistic-communicative progression, which, due to their linear nature, books and cassettes had and still have to do. Wouldn't the interaction between a learner and an almost unlimited number of native speakers which, in the real world, can only happen in the target language area, introduce a whole new opportunity for natural learning into a classroom based learning environment?

Answers have not yet been found to these questions but cyberspace, as a theoretical model, offers an interesting solution to the problem of how to harness the power of natural language acquisition without losing the positive aspects of structured classroom learning. This being pure science fiction, I'll conclude with a look at a programme in the real virtual world which tries to allow learners to make use of the internet while retaining the advantages of guided learning.

4. Guided reading on the internet: the case of *jetzt-online*

If the receptive skills of the learners are built up as part of a language course from the very beginning¹³, it will be possible to partially release them at a fairly early stage from the prescribed world of the textbook with its rigid progression into the world of 'real' contact through media. The further away the place of learning is from German-speaking areas or from centres with German tourists and business connections, the more important the role the new media have to play. The internet, particularly, is capable of providing up-to-the-minute current affairs and other aspects of *Landeskunde*; however, coupled with this source is the problem of becoming „lost in hyperspace“. A language learning internet version¹⁴ of *jetzt*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s supplement for young readers, was developed at the Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen in co-operation with the Goethe-Institut München; it attempts to combine the open world of the internet with didactic sanctuaries of different degrees, selected according to the needs of the users.

Reading is the main focus of this programme, even though, as the homepage in Fig. 1 reveals, viewing comprehension (with the current edition of the *Tagesschau*) is also part of the package, and a chat-room is on offer¹⁵.

¹³ Cf. Rösler (1998a: 59-93) for a discussion (with examples) of the importance of an early focus on reading comprehension in the foreign language learning curriculum in institutions outside the German-speaking area.

¹⁴ <http://www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/>

¹⁵ Apart from this, writing plays a marginal role – competitions encourage the learners to send in written contributions which can win prizes and are published.

Fig. 1: Homepage of *jetzt-online*

www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/



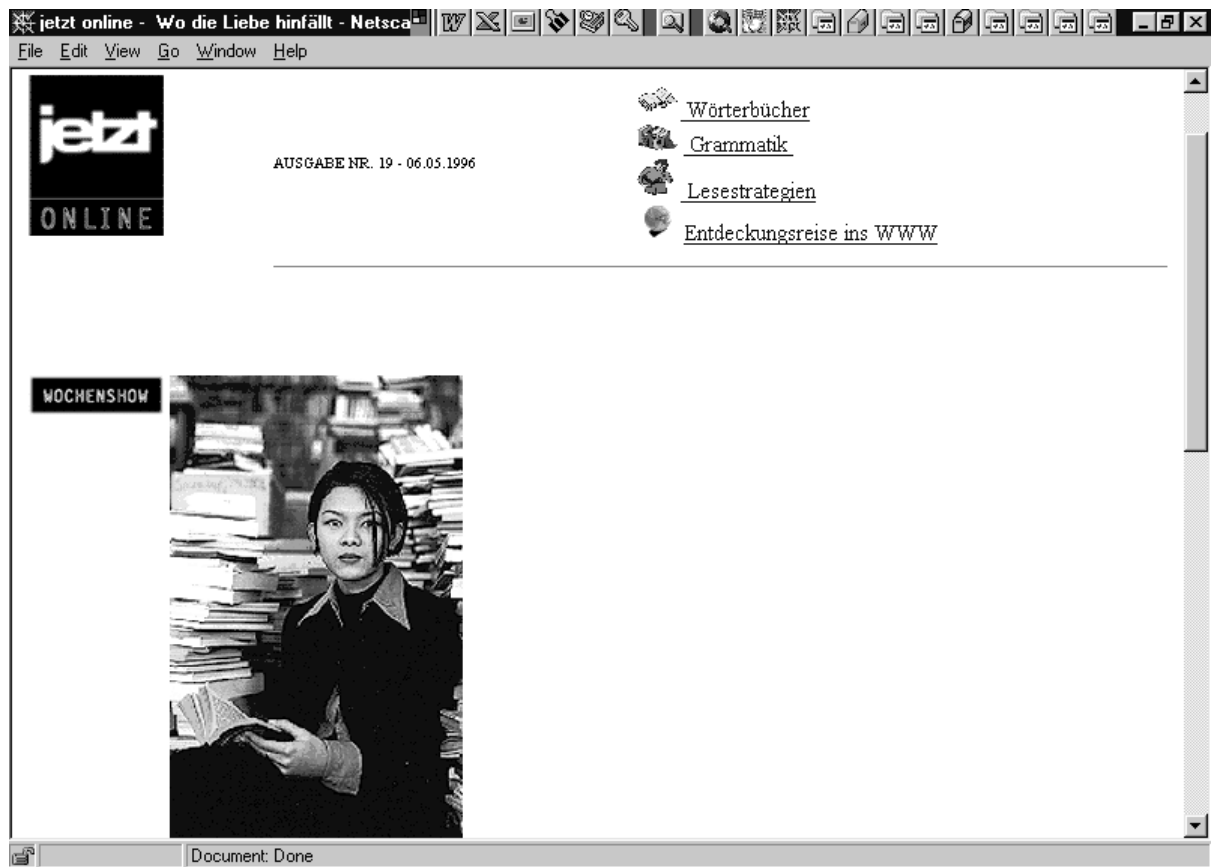
The programme addresses individual learners and teachers separately, in this article I will only give examples of its use for the individual learner¹⁶.

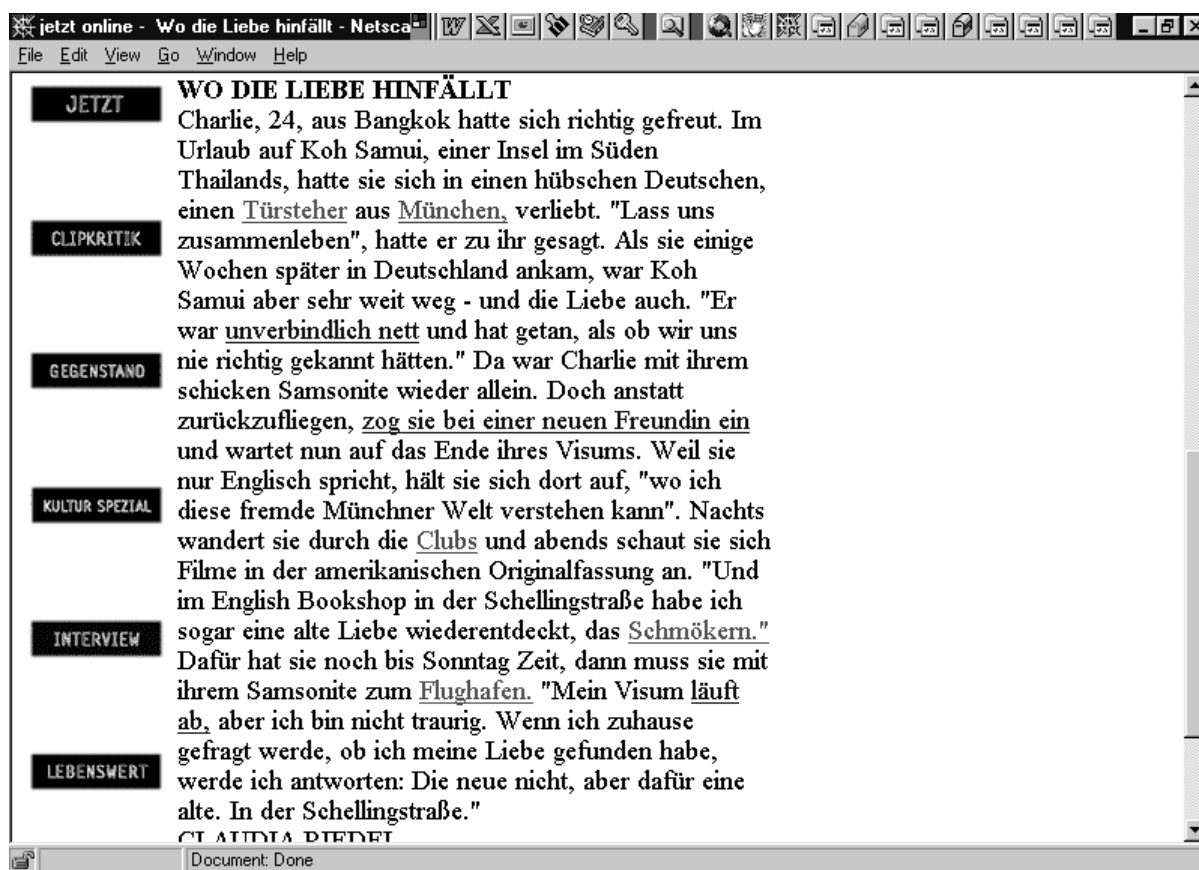
The programme offers texts which are presented simply as reading matter and are accessed via thematic selection, and texts which are furnished with different tasks and exercises and which introduce different reading strategies. The tasks differ in their degree of openness. At one end of the spectrum are those which remain totally within the realm of traditional language learning activities and which could also be found in a traditional, 'paper' textbook; at the other end are those which are specific to the internet and introduce navigation skills while at the same time protecting the learners from getting lost in hyperspace. Fig. 2 shows a reading text from the programme which contains links of different degrees of openness.

¹⁶ Ulrich/Legutke (1999) discuss the use of the programme from the perspective of the teacher and in teacher training.

Fig. 2: Reading text with links of different degrees of openness

www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/dejart65.htm

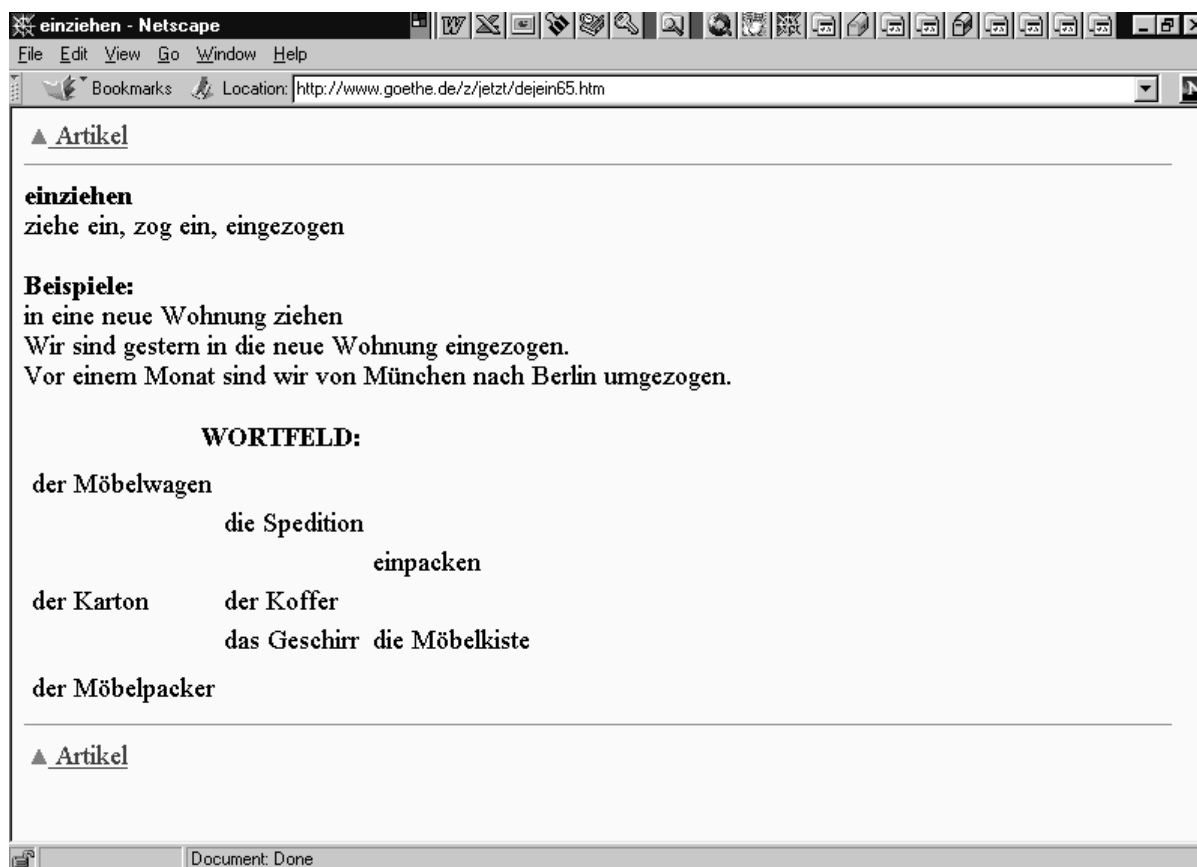




Blue links provide assistance in the form of brief information on grammar, on idiomatic expressions, on the context of lexical elements etc., an example – *zog sie bei einer neuen Freundin ein* - can be seen in Fig. 3. This type of information is always to be found in textbooks, work sheets etc. How helpful it is in any individual case depends on the linguistic proficiency of the learner in question. It is important for learners to know that, when calling up blue links, they remain in a shielded area in which they aren't overtaxed. The lack of contrastive components indicates that it is, as most commercially produced printed teaching material, a 'germanocentric' work, produced in the German language area. The nature of the internet does however allow (as indicated in chapter 3) for decentralized alternatives, produced by teachers or learners in different parts of the world, to be integrated into this central programme.

Fig. 3: Basic linguistic support as part of the reading programme

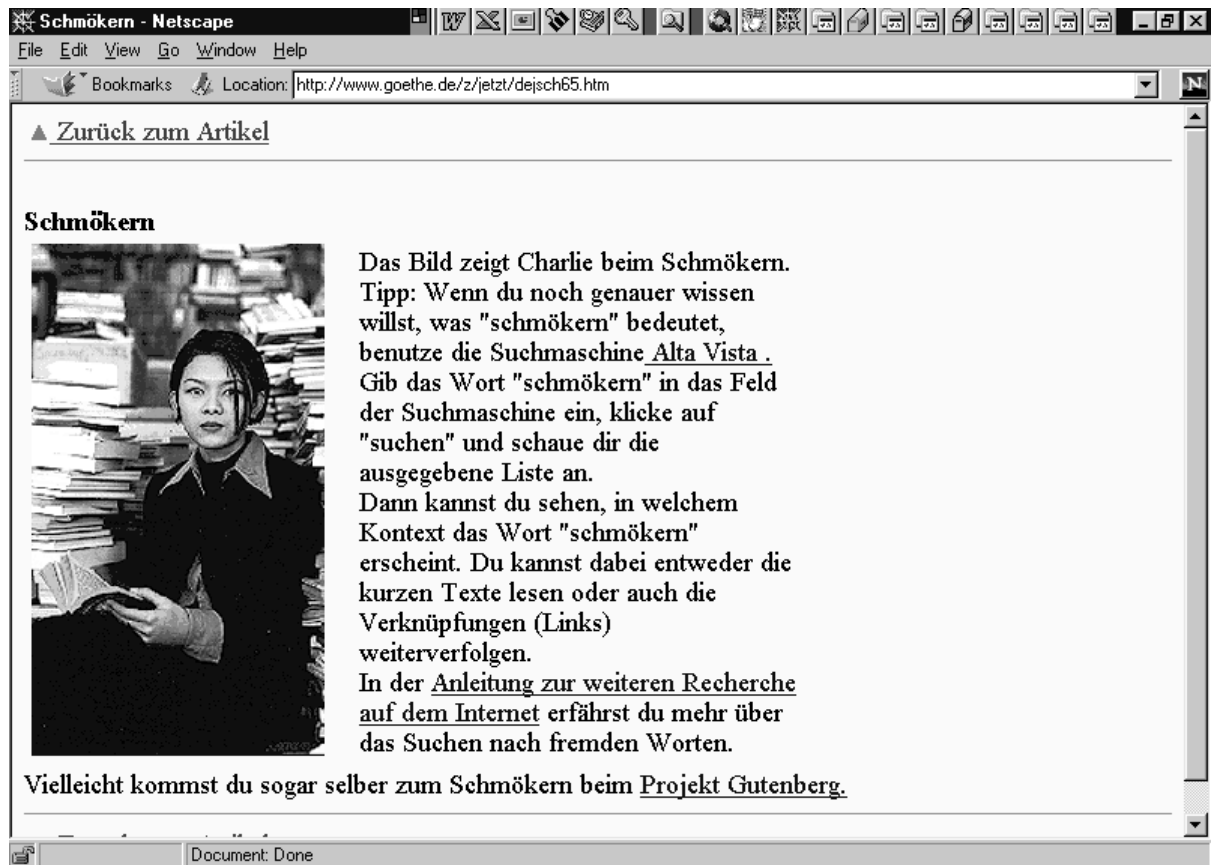
www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/dejein65.htm



Beyond these blue ones, there are two further types of links. The red ones lead, without any didactic preparation, straight to internet pages – for instance to homepages of organisations – and hence straight to up-to-the-minute information on a particular topic or institution. The green links lead learners to tasks which couldn't be solved without the internet. Fig. 4 illustrates this with an example of a task involving the word *schmökern*. Using *Alta Vista*, the learners have to find, compile and discuss contexts for this verb.

Fig. 4: Making didactic use of a specific feature of the internet: searching for contexts of a given word

www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/dejsch65.htm



These links are not limited to providing textual assistance for comprehension. Figures 5 and 6 show examples of a more complex task which can only be addressed by exploring the net. Picking up the story in the text in Fig. 2 – Charlie has to leave home – the task in Fig. 5 is to help her find a suitable hotel in Munich close to her favourite bookshop.

Fig. 5: An internet based *Landeskunde* task

www.goethe.de/z/jetzt/dejfra65.htm

jetzt online - Wo die Liebe hinfällt - Aufgabe

File Edit View Go Window Help

▲ [Artikel](#) ► [Hotelführer](#) ► [Stadtplan](#) ✉ [Schicke uns deine Antwort !](#)

Anweisungen:

1. **Klicke zuerst auf Stadtplan:** (Vorsicht: Ein neuer Browser wird geöffnet und du musst zwischen den beiden Browserfenstern hin und her schalten, um diese Anweisung zu lesen)
Wähle als Stadt **München**
und gib die **Schellingstrasse** ein.
2. Erkunde die Stadt mit den Pfeiltasten oder mit der Lupe (oben links im virtuellen Stadtplan).

In welcher Gegend befindest du dich?
3. Klicke nun auf den **Hotelführer**. Nach welchen Kriterien suchst du?
4. Klicke auf eine **Alternative** (z.B. Suche nach Preis) und wähle eine Kategorie aus (niedrig , mittel) und bestätige dann mit OK.
5. Schau dir nun die angegebenen Hotels an. Welches ist nicht weit von der Schellingstrasse entfernt? Welches ist am billigsten? Du musst entscheiden!

Suchaufgabe

Ziel der Aufgabe: Du lernst, in einer Datenbank zu recherchieren und gezielt nach Informationen zu suchen. Du lernst, Karten zu lesen.

1. **Charlie muss bei ihrer Freundin ausziehen. Suche ein günstiges Hotel oder eine Pension in der Nähe des *British Bookshop* in der Schellingstrasse! Benutze dazu den Hotelführer von München und den Stadtplandienst.**
2. **Im linken Fenster findest du weitere Anweisungen.**
3. **Wenn du es gefunden hast, kannst du deine Antworten an uns schicken!**

Document: Done

With the help of an excerpt from a map and using the hotel guide for Munich in the internet (cf. Fig. 6), the learners have to develop an optimizing strategy: which hotel is reasonably priced and nonetheless located centrally enough for Charlie's needs?

Fig. 6: Making use of a non-didactic internet page within an internet-based *Landeskunde* task

<http://www.deutschland-hotel.de/muc/muenchen.htm>



Incorporating the internet into teaching German as a foreign language, especially in countries which are far away from German-speaking areas, will become increasingly important. Students will want to work with texts which are didactically prepared on different levels as described here, search completely independently for information or simply establish contacts via email or chat rooms. The new media will not solve the basic problems of learning a foreign language outside the target language area but they do enable teachers to react to the existing limitations in an innovative and imaginative way and permit the boundaries of classroom learning to be pushed back further by integrating elements of natural language acquisition.

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