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European Studies: Electronic 'eurolingua' Study Paths

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Abstract

This project continues earlier projects to build up, enhance and revise electronic support for language learning of German as prescribed by the European Studies curriculum. A new system of so-called electronic 'Study Paths' was created, covering language learning needs for year one and two of the course. The system operates with easy-to-use authoring software and is constantly being expanded to provide a 'personalized' stock of interactive language learning activities.

Key words

Electronic 'eurolingua' study paths, European studies

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this project was to upgrade the E-learning and electronic reference system of the German Stream of the BSocSc (Hons) in European Studies. The system ('Study Paths') was originally developed in 1996 and expanded in successive years (Hess, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Hess & Stählin, 1997). It covers approximately one third of the required units/credits of the course and is attached to the courses *GERM 1111-2 and GERM 2111-2* (32 units/credits). A 'Study Path' is an electronic tool to link appropriate self-access learning materials to a certain stage or segment of the classroom tuition process. The system's objective is the provision of extensive self-study

opportunities for rapid language acquisition, which are at every stage commensurate with the level reached by the student. They lead and encourage students to language activities parallel to and beyond the classroom. The intensive acquisition of German up to a fair level of fluency at the end of semester 4 is a key requirement of the course, which cannot be reached unless such additional, systematic self-study patterns can be established.

As Study Paths are closely linked to the classroom syllabus, a revision became necessary because the course team switched to a new textbook and method. Since September 2001, the textbook *Moment mall* (Müller et al., 1996) became the main basis for teaching and learning.

Studies on Teaching and Learning

Preparations for the new system started in April 2001 and were finalized in September 2001. During the AY 2001-2002, the Study Paths were progressively enlarged with tailor-made online exercises and reference listings for further self-access learning. Concurrently, weekly tutorials for year-one students were (and are still) held to familiarize students (year one) with the system and to systematically develop their self-study skills. The new online system is accessible at <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/mmpaths/mm0.htm> or through the 'portal' of the German Stream at <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/gindex.htm> ('Study Paths (MM)'). The old Study Paths (based on the textbook Themen neu) have remained online for additional self-learning support (<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/gindex.htm>). Students can make use of the system in the course's Self-Access Learning Unit (SALU), at home or from any point with online connections.

Methodology

The Study Path system was revised according to the results of structured questionnaires regarding self-access learning (see below Project Stage 1).

Language learning activities and exercises were (and are) then written parallel to the gradual classroom progression with the new textbook. This ensures that the online activities correspond closely to the needs of students, as they are observable in the classroom. The activities can be (and are) modified on a permanent basis in line with student needs and interests. They

partly use 'avatars' of our own students, i.e. photographs and/or comments provided by the students themselves. This is meant to increase motivation for using the system. By way of classroom teaching and additional intensive 1:1 self-access learning tutorials, student feedback is constantly included in the process of enlarging the system (see Stage 2).

The project uses MS Frontpage for its basic outline. The online activities were written mostly with the 'Hot Potatoes' software from the University of Victoria/ British Columbia and the web-based 'Quintessential Instructional Archive' (QUIA). The course holds an annually renewable licence from Quia. In addition, Markin 2.1 from Creative Technologies (U.K.) is used for electronic correction of student texts and feedback purposes. The software packages are far more cost-effective and simple to use than the University's 'Web CT' system.

Project Stage 1 (April – June 2001): Evaluation of the Previous Study Path System and Its Usage by Students

German Stream students have worked with Study Paths since 1996. The self-access practice was monitored regularly, and student suggestions were continuously incorporated to improve the 'user friendliness' of the system. In April 2001, a detailed final "SALU questionnaire" was administered to all year-one and year-two students (Hess, 2001e), which aimed at finding guidelines for the construction of

the new Paths and general improvements of self-learning facilities of the programme. The structured questionnaire consisted of six parts with a total of 80 questions. Students were asked to rate facilities and learning experiences on three- or four-item Likert scales. They had the opportunity to add written open-ended comments to each question.

Table 1: Self-Access Learning and E-Learning in the German Stream of Studies (Questionnaire)

Focus	No. of questions
A The SALU in general	7
B SALU components	5
C E-Learning	9
D E-Mail & Chat	8
E Study Paths for German	11
F E-Learning and Area Studies	40 (administered separately)

The questionnaire referred to all courses of the programme currently taught with electronic (online) support: *EURO 1110*, *EURO 2120*, *EURO 3120*, *POLS 2170*, *GERM 1111-2*, *GERM 2111-2*. As far as they are relevant for this project, the results can be summarized as follows.

The SALU is an indispensable centerpiece of language learning and area studies, used on average 5-10 hours/week on top of classes. Self-access language learning preferably begins with access to the electronic Study Path system. 80% of year-one students, for example, cited the Study Paths as the 'most frequently used component for learning (27% of year-two students – with 45% quoting 'WWW pages for Area Studies' as the predominant source).

The original Study Path system was conceived as a (electronic) reference guide to non-electronic learning materials. 93% of year-one students and 100% of year-two students rated it as 'very useful' or 'often useful'. Since about 1999, the course team used new possibilities of creating interactive online exercises to further enhance the system. These 'Online-Übungen' (online exercises) now became the predominantly used component for self-study (for 87% of year-one, 64% of year-two), due to convenient access and the fact that they were tailor-made and specifically related to classroom teaching. All other learning opportunities, including WWW study material from other locations, have since then steadily lost ground.

In general, students were very satisfied with the structure and layout of the original Study Paths. These were rated 'clear and easy to handle' by 67% of year-one and 36% of year-two or 'mostly clear' by 33% of year-one and 64% of year-two. The difference can be explained by the fact that year-one students had tailor-made 'Online-Übungen', whereas year-two students were referred to other media formats.

We decided therefore:

- to author an entire new online exercise system for the new textbook *Moment mal!* as the central and immediate means to provide practise and revision of the classroom syllabus,
- to establish a parallel but separate reference system for further individual study with SALU and WWW materials,

Studies on Teaching and Learning

- to introduce concurrent self-study tutorials for year-one students in order to train them gradually in establishing their own learning preferences and utilising supplementary SALU materials. The overall structure of the Study Paths, however, could be maintained.

A side effect of the questionnaire, although not directly relevant to this project, was a shift in buying policies for the SALU. 'Traditional' media formats, with the exception of popular video and audio material, are now scaled down. This also (partly) includes multimedia CD-ROMs for language learning. All of these were rated as 'inconvenient', 'time-consuming' to use and mostly inappropriate for students' immediate learning needs. The focus is now predominantly on WWW-based learning.

**Project Stage 2 (July - August 2001,
September 2001 – May 2002):
Construction of the New Study Path System**

The new Study Path system corresponds to three volumes of the textbook *Moment mall*. The volumes are to be worked through in four semesters and lead to the internationally acknowledged Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Certificate of German as a Foreign Language). Acquiring this certificate is a mandatory requirement for students to pass into year three (and hence continue their studies in Europe). The Study Path system includes a total of 40 individual paths. Students can access them by going directly to the Kapitel (lesson) they are currently studying.

Alternatively, the project team created a topical index ('Themen') and a grammar index ('Grammatik'). Students can therefore choose language activities according to a topic or they can revise specific grammar points if they wish. The textbook method is based on a "spiral curriculum", which means that certain topics or grammatical functions occur several times over the learning period of four semesters, with increasing linguistic complexity. Since the online system is available at all times, students can easily switch back to refresh previously acquired skills/knowledge or can progress individually in three different structuring modes (classroom progression, topical threads or grammar paths). The opening pages of the system are shown in Figures 1 - 3.



Figure 1. Opening Page of the Study Path System



Figure 2. Topical Index of the System

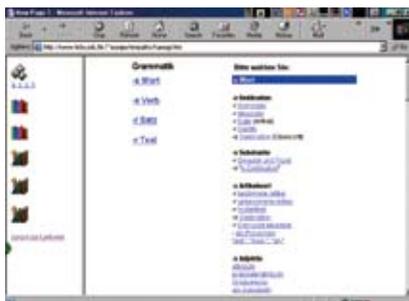


Figure 3. Grammar Index of the System

Each Study Path is framed by additional learning tools (Figure 4):

- introduction into working with the system
- instructions for using German characters on the PC
- online dictionaries (English-German-English)
- online grammars
- links to move back and forth within the system
- additional links to German-language

radio stations online (music channels for young people, news channels, see Figure 6).

Instructions are initially given in English, with an early switch to German already towards the end of semester I (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Opening Page / Study Paths 1-15

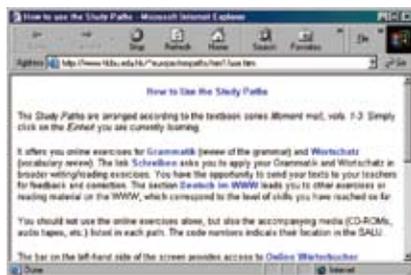


Figure 5. Initial (English) Usage Instructions

Studies on Teaching and Learning

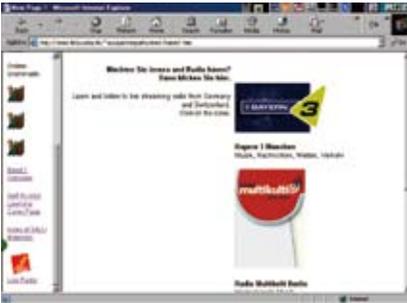


Figure 6. Online Radio



Figure 7. Internal Structure of a Study Path / Using student 'avatars' to enhance motivation

Study Paths are tools to structure exercise types and to allow students to choose language learning activities according to need, interest and individual learning preference. Earlier empirical evidence (observation and questionnaires) showed that students prefer online activities over other media formats, and structured exercises pertaining to current lessons over 'free' browsing (Hess, 2001a). We therefore concentrated on authoring review exercises in four categories (Figure 7),

which gradually lead from precise reviews to 'independent' language (communicative) usage:

1. Grammar (Grammatik) (see Figures 8+9)
2. Vocabulary (Wortschatz) (Figure 10)
3. Writing (Schreiben) (Figure 11)
4. German in the WWW (Deutsch im WWW) (Figure 12)

The system so far deliberately excludes language activities, which can be done better and more meaningfully in class or in face-to-face tutorials (e.g. conversation/listening). Thus, preference is given to language structures and the lexicon as well as writing activities. Writing skills depend on the existence of an addressee. The system therefore provides direct e-mail links to all lecturers of the German Stream (Figure 13). In addition, the course team works with a standardized e-mail correction programme. Regardless of whether students write in response to a Study Path activity suggestion or in 'free style', they will always obtain a detailed correction feedback plus comments by one of their teachers (Figure 14). Links to appropriate language learning exercises elsewhere on the Internet and to sites of interest round up the Study Path system (Figure 15). With increasing proficiency, these links can be used for explorative 'research' into matters German.



Figure 8. Review Exercises (Sample: Opening Page)

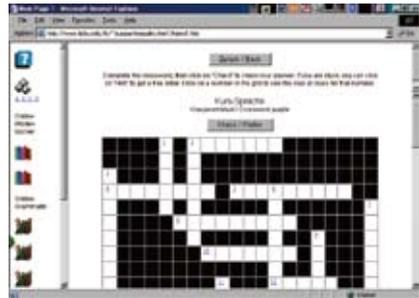


Figure 11. Vocabulary Exercises (Hot Potatoes)

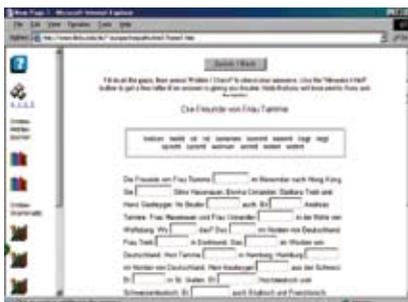


Figure 9. Grammar Exercise (Beginner's Level / Kapitel 1)

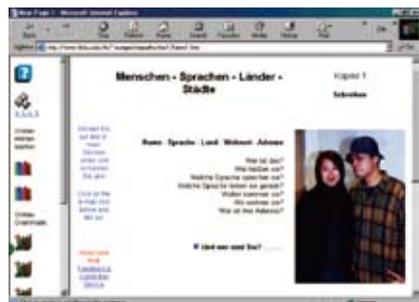


Figure 12. Writing Tasks (Beginner's Stage)



Figure 10. Vocabulary Exercises (Quia)



Figure 13. Training Writing Skills: Link Page to Lecturers

Studies on Teaching and Learning

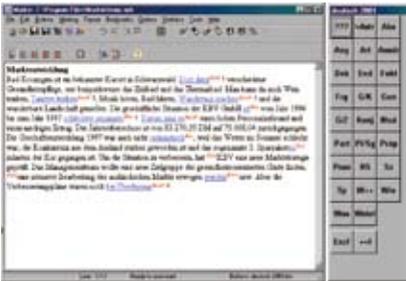


Figure 14. E-mail feedback program (sample screen / advanced learners)

The rationale of the system and empirical evidence about its usage are discussed in detail in various published articles (see reference list). Its proven effectiveness does not depend on using fanciful ‘multimedia’ gadgets but rather on its systematic linkage with the classroom and students’ learning needs at each stage of language acquisition. It was developed for the students of the German Stream of European Studies at HKBU, but is available freely on the WWW. Thus, it serves a community of German language learners in Hong Kong currently estimated at approx. 1,500 for the beginner’s and lower-intermediate level. Beyond that, it can be used by anyone worldwide currently studying with the textbook *Moment mall*. In combination with the earlier version of Study Paths online (‘Themen neu’), it supplies online learning activities for an estimated 1,000 hours of individual (self-access) language learning.

Limitations/Difficulties

Contrary to many statements about the alleged advantages of ‘multimedia’ or ‘online learning’, such systems do not per se improve learning. They can do so only if they are an integrated part of an intensive language learning environment, the centre of which remains the classroom. The system has proved to be extremely popular with all students – to the extent that it is ‘tailor-made’ and closely related to all other parts of the learning environment (Hess, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2003b, 2006).



Figure 15. WWWTasks

To achieve this aim and enhance the

system further, a very intensive, concerted effort by all lecturers teaching language subjects is necessary on a continued basis (Hess, 2003a). In the future, the system will require further constant expansion and modification (rather than conventional one-off grants to establish an electronic 'infrastructure' as in the present case). This collective task goes far beyond normal language teachers' remit and must be acknowledged appropriately.

It was also found in all previous projects (including this one) that the availability of IT resources does not automatically guarantee systematic usage. The more complex resource collections (online and offline) are and the more individual choice is offered to students, the more important and indispensable counselling and additional tutorial sessions become.

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