

APPLICATION OF E-LEARNING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS BASED ON A COURSE *DEUTSCH LEHREN LERNEN*

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***Abstract:** Forms of e-learning are being applied not only in education but are also being gradually implemented in the area of teacher development, including these of foreign language teachers. One of the leading institutions in this area is Goethe-Institut - a well-known and recognised cultural institution, acting on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany as a public benefit association. As a tutor of Goethe-Institut courses, the author presents her experience of running, since 2015, many editions of a qualifying course *Deutsch Lehren Lernen (DLL)*. Based on Stufflebeam's (2007) CIPP evaluation model key aspects of the DLL-course are discussed such as: the conditioning of implementations and the target group; the selection of content and the learning progression; assessment and evaluation tools, and in particular, the role and tasks of the tutor, because in the context of successful e-teaching, the tutor fulfils specific tasks, becoming a consultant who accompanies and supports the learning process. Also the results of the evaluation questionnaires and the participants opinions gained through direct communication are discussed. In the author's assessment, the DLL-course – although not without certain flaws and shortcomings – can be an example of good practice in the use of e-learning in teacher development.*

Keywords: pedeutology, teacher development, action research; ICT, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

The Goethe-Institut is a well-known and recognised cultural institution, acting on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany as a public benefit association with headquarters in Munich. Established in 1951, the institute now has 136 branches and 11 contact offices in 92 countries, carrying out a wide range of tasks in the field of foreign cultural policy. The

Institute's main objectives are to strengthen the position of the German language among other foreign languages, to provide broad access to information and knowledge about Germany, to disseminate German culture, to promote cultural exchange as well as to develop cooperation in the field of education.

An important area of the Goethe-Institut's activity over the last few years has been the systematic expansion of its digital offers, including, among others, applications for mobile devices, games, social media applications and course elements run on distance learning platforms. In terms of professional training, the Goethe-Institut also offers a comprehensive qualification programme and developmental courses for teachers of German as a foreign language, implemented in individual countries, in Germany and as in the case of *DLL Methodik und Didaktik* in the form of distance learning. More detailed information can be obtained from the website <http://www.goethe.de/lrn/prj/for/kur/mud/deindex.htm>.

1. GENERAL COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

The *DLL Methodik und Didaktik* course consists of six modules, comprising three phases: Phase I includes module *DLL3 - Deutsch als fremde Sprache* and module *DLL2 - Wie lernt man die Fremdsprache Deutsch*; Phase II consists of module *DLL6 - Curriculare Vorgaben und Unterrichtsplanung* and module *DLL4 - Aufgaben, Übungen und Interaktion*; Phase III consists of module *DLL5 - Lernmaterialien und Medien* and module *DLL1 - Lehrkompetenz und Unterrichtsgestaltung*. After completion of all phases, the participants, at a time convenient to them, write a final exam which is to be carried out on a specially designed test platform. The final test lasts 60 minutes and covers a total of 60 tasks (mostly in the form of single or multiple-choice questions). Test participant may repeat the test once without incurring additional costs. In order to become familiar with the format of the tasks in the final test, the participants have access to a sample test for each of the three phases of the course, allowing them to attempt and practice solving the test tasks; however, they do not receive descriptive formative assessment. The minimum estimated time needed to complete the course is nine months. In order to best meet the different circumstances and needs of the students, there is a possibility of extending the course by up to three months free of charge, and up to a maximum of another three months – by means of a paid extension. The course is individual in nature, so the forms of communication with other participants are limited to two moderated forums: a general forum and a thematic forum dedicated to discussing issues related to exam preparation.

The pilot implementation phase of the course, conducted in accordance with the so-called rapid prototyping approach of Tripp and Bichelmeyer (Tripp & Bichelmeyer 1990), began in May 2014. The tutors - totalling almost 200 people - participated in all modules of the course. Thanks to this they became thoroughly acquainted with the content, types of tasks and forms of evaluation from the point of view of the participant. This allowed for a thorough and in-depth understanding

of the content and tasks of the course as well as the testing of instructional effectiveness along with the usefulness of applied concepts and planned processes such as interactive activities and navigation frameworks. After completing the evaluation and during a series of teleconferences, the participants, as future tutors, provided to the authors and developers of the course their observations and remarks; consequently, their feedback was considered in the course of the modification of the content and communication tools.

Immediately following the completion of the course, there was another distance training session, this time in the field of tutoring skills, which covered the following topics:

- specificity of distance-based and low-contact learning;
- specificity of learning by adults and the elderly;
- working with asynchronous and synchronous communication tools;
- constructing effective feedback;
- creating social relationships with course participants;
- supporting participants in the process of self-organised learning;
- motivating, supporting and advising participants.

The demonstration version of that course is available online at website <http://lernplattform.goethe.de/course/view.php?id=53>. Future DLL course tutors had been recruited, for the most part, from those who for many years had collaborated with the Goethe-Institut on international educational projects. Since they did not have any experience or formal preparation in performing tutorial duties, this training was crucial, mainly for defining common and homogeneous tutoring standards. Based on the materials available to the author from the head office of the Goethe-Institut in Munich, as of June 2018, there are more than 140 DLL course cycles running in various detailed configurations, in which a total of over 2900 international participants are taking part.

2. TARGET GROUP AND CONTEXT OF THE COURSE

The *DLL Methodik und Didaktik* qualification course which has been offered by the Goethe-Institut since 2015 is directed at German teachers who teach foreign language lessons, conducting classes at all levels of school education, including adult classes. Teachers who have at least a few years of teaching experience or have had appropriate pedagogical or German-speaking lessons as a foreigner are the main target participants. In addition, applicants who are not native speakers of the language need to produce proof of proficiency in the German language at least at a proficiency level B2 of the Common European Framework.

Due to the fact that the content of all course units is available both electronically, on the Moodle platform, and also in book form, participants can define their

preferred learning style: exclusively online, by reading the content available on the platform, mainly using printed content or by only posting the solved tasks on the platform. According to the author's observation, learners older than 35, despite their keen interest in new technologies and modern forms of education are definitely more likely to prefer traditional forms and choose the paper version of the DLL, which is in contrast to the younger participants.

One of the critical factors influencing the effectiveness of e-learning is undoubtedly a strong and stable motivation. A participant who utilises the distant mode of learning, in addition to a cultivated sense of self-reliance, also needs good time management skills along with a mastery of self-regulation strategies in confronting unfamiliar and complex teaching situations. Empirical studies in this field have shown clearly a positive correlation between internal motivation, arousing thematic interest as well as teaching effectiveness (Schiefele 1996; Schiefele, Pekrun, 1996). Apart from motivation, the learner's personality traits are also very significant. As pointed out by Baumert and Köller (1996) and Niegemann et al. (2004), those who achieve positive results in remote teaching are flexible, reflective in their approach, exhibit analytical skills, show responsibility and awareness of goals, exhibit perseverance, curiosity and openness and have a positive self-image. The present author's observations seem to confirm that: it is significant that internally motivated learners rarely need additional incentives to learn, they take the initiative and responsibility for learning effectiveness, they try to maximise the benefits of taking part in the course through forum participation, networking with other participants, they also ask/formulate additional and substantive questions, correct the submitted tasks and are not satisfied with lower ratings.

The current political and social situation in Germany has significantly influenced the context of how the course is conducted. The migration crisis has prompted the need to prepare a large number of teachers in a short period of time for language courses catering to the refugees, the so-called integration courses (*Integrationskurs*). These courses include 600 hours of language study along with an additional 60 hours, during which participants learn about the history, society and the main aspects of German culture. From the very beginning, the implementation of integration courses and the verification of teacher qualifications have been coordinated by the *Federal Office for Migration and Refugees* (German: *BAMF*). Among the nearly 7000 licensed public and private entities authorised to conduct BAMF integration courses, there are higher vocational schools as well as branches of the Goethe-Institut. The above-mentioned situation caused a surge of interest in the DLL course and a staggering increase in the number of students at the turn of 2015 and 2016. To each tutor this specifically meant a manifold increase in the number of students from an average of 20-25 to 80-90. The situation was further complicated by the fact that most of the new entrants received the funding for attending the course from BAMF, however they were obliged to complete it within a nine-month period, which left them under pressure.

3. CONSTRUCTION AND SELECTION OF CONTENT

Each of the six DLL (DLL3-DLL2, DLL6-DLL4 and DLL5-DLL1) units is built according to a clear and uniform layout of the content, providing a good intuitive orientation. An example of the DLL demonstration course is available online at <http://lernplattform.goethe.de/course/view.php?id=16>.

The DLL3 module is dedicated to the specificity of the target language and explains the characteristics of German as a foreign language, in terms of its lexical, grammatical, phonetic and pragmatic aspects. The main purpose of the course is to develop the participant's linguistic competence. In turn, the DLL2 module focuses on the question of how to effectively learn a foreign language. The focus is on the student who is the subject of the didactic process and whose personal variables determine the effectiveness of learning.

The second phase starts from the DLL6 module. This unit discusses planning requirements for the whole cycle of education as well as the individual lessons. Course participants will learn/explore the content of the framework guidelines and the didactic principles of teaching. This module indicates important landmarks for the day-to-day work of the teacher and informs about the innovations in lesson planning, such as different types and models of lessons. In DLL4, the authors focus on tasks, exercises, and interactions as being the central elements of each lesson. The last phase, referred to in the DLL5 module, concerns educational and media materials, including the ability to effectively adapt and create their own glottodidactic materials. DLL1, the final course module, tries to answer the following questions: How can one professionally develop themselves as a teacher? What are the specific challenges that accompany teaching? How to create a motivational and inspirational atmosphere that is devoid of fear? How to control the effectiveness of the didactic process and measure school achievement? As can be seen from the above characteristics, the selection and ordering of the course modules is characterised by the logical progression of the content from the fundamental issues focused around psychological, physiological and linguistic conditioning of effective teaching to the specialised issues directly related to the planning and conducting of the didactic process. Each unit includes a detailed list of learning objectives in its introduction and ends with a self-evaluation; each provides a glossary of basic terms, an answer key for selected tasks as well as a wide range of examples from current textbooks for learning German.

The above-mentioned evaluation sheet consists of 16 questions (cf. Table 1.), from which nine are multiple-choice questions and seven are open and give the participants space to freely express the opinions regarding the course.

Table 1.**Evaluation sheet for participants in every module of the course**

Introduction: “Help us to further improve the quality of the course - your opinion is very important to us! Please fill out this questionnaire. The survey is of course anonymous, all data is used confidentially.”

Number	Question	Options
No. 1	Did you complete the course unit extra-occupationally?	Yes No Partially
No. 2	How many hours did you spend on this lesson about every week?	4-5 Less than 4 More than 5
No. 3	Did you have access to the lesson while completing the course unit?	Yes No Partially
No. 4	Did you find all the information you needed to complete the course unit in the course programme?	Yes No
No. 5	If no, what was missing in the course programme, what was unclear, ambiguous?	<i>Open question</i>
No. 6	Which content was particularly valuable to you?	<i>Open question</i>
No. 7	What content did you miss?	<i>Open question</i>
No. 8	Were the tasks helpful?	Yes No Partially
No. 9	Did you have any difficulty understanding the tasks?	Yes No/ If so, please answer the next question
No. 10	Where and what kind of difficulties were there?	<i>Open question</i>
No. 11	Were there any technical issues with the online connection that caused you to miss certain offers of the course?	Yes No/ If so, please answer the next question
No.12	What technical problems occurred?	<i>Open question</i>
No.13	Was communication with the tutor easily possible?	Yes No Partially
No.14	Did the tutor adequately respond to your requests?	Yes No Partially
No.15	What did you like?	<i>Open question</i>
No.16	What bothered you during the course?	<i>Open question</i>

Source: own work

An important and attractive feature for the participants of each course is the actual recording of language classes, conducted at branches of the Goethe-Institut across three continents thereby in different and often very specific conditions. Each module uses the portfolios method, which supports autonomous and reflective learning. As a kind of individual dossier, the portfolio contains 10 to 20 tasks and on one hand serves as a self-documentation of achievements, while on the other hand a way to formulate questions for further self-study. 70% of all tasks are mandatory, the rest are marked as optional. Each task is given a form of feedback (“answer key”, “tutor response”, “automatic feedback” – in the case of tests), as well as estimated time needed for its execution. For example, the DLL1 module includes a total of 73 tasks, 23 of which are tasks containing individual feedback and an assessment from the tutor. Correct execution of other mandatory tasks is confirmed by sending an automatic notification. Proportions have been preserved between the receptive activities which check the understanding of content and the activity characteristic of open tasks or mini-projects.

Another valuable and important component of a course that favours empowerment is an action-research-type task, known as *Praxiserkundungsprojekt (PEP)*. Because of the high dynamics of changes occurring during school routine and thus the high unpredictability of everyday situations of teachers and educators, an approach that promotes the development of reflective and lifelong learning (Kwiatkowska 2008) is becoming increasingly important and justified. One of the methods serving this purpose is action research which is a kind of pedagogical design study and implementation, undertaken by a teacher which aims at improving the practice of pedagogy (Boeckmann 2010; Huber 2009). As part of the study, the teacher (being either a student or a course participant) formulates his or her own research question, carries it into a student group of their choice and then documents and analyses the results.

Action research is a multi-phase process; which in particular, consists of the following stages (Surdyk 2006: 912): basic diagnosis and analysis of the status, in regards to teaching and learning; formulation on the basis of an analysis of the initial state of questions and hypotheses, concerned with improving teaching and learning; defining the context of data collection, timing and methods, i.e. the planning of a research project along with the systematic collection of data in as many different forms as possible for the purposes of triangulation; the empirical verification of questions and hypotheses by analysing and interpreting the collected data in the search for solutions to problems and changes in past behaviours or practices; the implementation of changes as well as the formulation of further questions.

Research questions formulated within the framework of the course should be closely related to the content of the course units concerned (e.g. DLL2, DLL3). This allows the course to gain a stronger connection and reference to the practice and schooling experience of the course participant and the educational theory becomes secondary to the practice and is contained in the activity from which it is

extracted and brought up to the level of consciousness. Working on the PEP project also gives participants the opportunity to become aware of and possibly verify the so called internal pedagogical theories (Michońska-Stadnik 2013). As deep-seated views and private opinions of professional theories held by individual teachers' internal pedagogical theories are significantly conditioned by their practical actions and behaviour, they relate on the one hand, to the language itself along with the processes of its teaching and learning, while on the other to the variety of conditions for success as well as the essence of motivation.

4. ROLE AND SPECIFIC TASKS OF THE TUTOR

In the context of successful teaching, the tutor fulfils specific tasks, becoming a consultant who accompanies and supports the learning process. Tutoring does not require the delivery of substantive information, as it is already provided in the form of materials such as text, sound files, films, drawings, simulations etc., on the platform, but rather by being an active guide and advisor to the learner (Erpenbeck et al. 2015: 21). The tutor should thoroughly understand the specifics and nature of tutoring in order for the scope of his intervention not to overly and unnecessarily interfere with the learner's own and individually organised learning process. The scope of tasks for both the tutor and the learner is determined in a precise manner within the curriculum, relating to a form of schooling practice known as the *class contract* (German: *Klassenvertrag*). The responsibilities and tasks of the tutor in the DLL course relate to four key areas also mentioned in the subject literature (Häfele & Maier-Häfele 2008; Klimsa & Issing 2011). They are didactic, socio-communicative, technical and organisational tasks.

4.1 Didactic tasks

Didactic tasks boil down to the systematic provision of feedback information of the sent tasks. Occasionally, course participants also direct queries to the tutor requesting the clarification of terminology related to the course material. This is most often the case in the first module (DLL3) as well as the DLL5 module which is related to the use of information and communication technology in teaching. For most of the inquiries, one only needs to refer to the available course material without the need for additional resources. For interested students who wish to explore the issue themselves, the authors prepared in every module a list of additional literature, consisting of 40-50 bibliographic items.

4.2 Socio-communicative and technical tasks

Socio-communicative tasks relate to establishing contact with the participants, the systematic indication of one's presence on the platform, and the willingness to provide help and support in order to motivate learning. This requires the tutor to understand individual style of learning, respecting various work routines while also accepting individual views on the essence of teaching as well as to understanding the different role of a teacher. Since the beginning of the course, the DLL group of

participants has been very heterogeneous as they have been recruited from all continents and have very different levels of initial knowledge, putting some high demands on the intercultural competence of the tutors.

As far as technical tasks are concerned, the tutor is responsible for providing information on the operation of the platform and its tools, taking care of the smooth operation of the technology, and reporting technical difficulties to the support team. A significantly higher amount of questions related to technical aspects appear in the two first modules of the course (DLL3 and DLL2). Although an extensive and highly detailed technical guide for each type of task and activity is available on the platform, the tutor must take into account additional time constraints resulting from the need to answer not only substantive questions, but also by providing technical support in order to solve problems. Unfortunately, from their point of view, the participants perceive this procedure as not being optimal, or even unfavourable, and would like to interact directly with IT professionals so as to reduce the response time to a minimum.

4.3 Organisational tasks

Organisational tasks include informing the learner about their progress in completing the mandatory task pool, sending the enrolment key for the next module, and finally informing the learners of their completion of a single module or the entire course. Equally important as in traditional learning is the ability to diagnose educational needs and to objectively evaluate participants on the basis of clear and well-known criteria as well as evaluating own achievements.

A major obstacle to the above-mentioned tasks and responsibilities is the large diversity of the group, and the very vague information regarding the participants which is being supplied to the tutor. It is only during the course that the tutor can obtain further information which is relevant. An improvement in this matter would be to include important data relating to learners (for example, the form and extent of past professional experience, occupational interest, type of school in which the participant is either employed or intends to work at) in their user profile. With a relatively small number of participants (between 20 and 30) it is possible to provide feedback within 24 hours, which is consistent with expectations and recognised in the evaluation as one of the major advantages of the DLL course. However, with a number of 80-90 participants, this is not physically possible. The organisers did not foresee any form and possibility of the temporary support of a tutor who is too busy due to a large number of active students. Another important issue is that only 5% of participants report that they are planning longer breaks on the platform, which greatly reduces the predictability of the time load along with the planning of the tutor's activities. It would be helpful to create a tool to easily record planned breaks.

CONCLUSION

The DLL course concept has been developed for the daily activities and challenges facing the teacher in the classroom. The authors have been able to skilfully integrate discussions related to traditional issues such as teaching language skills, developing grammar, lexical and phonetic skills with more general aspects such as individualisation, the learning of autonomy or strategy training. The lesson examples provided are very numerous and varied enough to not prefer one narrowly defined didactic model and teacher's teaching pattern; and through open tasks tend to encourage participants to actively seek their own individual career path. In terms of content selection, the course consciously and deliberately does not favour any of the familiar methods and techniques of teaching foreign languages, presenting participants with broad and varied spectrum of issues, taking into account all the previously developed and recommended principles of scientifically proven effectiveness such as, among others, language proficiency, intercultural orientation, self-reliance, reflectivity and learner autonomy, competency of autonomous education, task orientation and the use of activation methods. The results of the evaluation questionnaires confirm that the participants particularly appreciate the platform itself along with all its tools, the high availability of tutors, the professional support in both substantive and technical matters, as well as the speed of feedback. Among the positives is the fact that the teaching objectives are very clear and achievable within the allowed time frame. Participants also emphasise that the course material is prepared by keeping all key methodological principles and allowing for comfortable self-reliant workflows. In conclusion, it can be stated that the temporary and substantive framework of the *DLL Methodik und Didaktik* course, as well as its technical conditions, as specified by the authors, seem to be fully adequate at being implemented and completed within the allowed time frame.

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