

Germanistik Digital - New Challenges of the On-line Learning

Hornáček Banášová, Monika

Abstract—No doubt that an increasingly digital society needs to open up new ways of learning.

The objectives of the project Erasmus+ 2020-1-SK01-KA226-HE-094271 called "Germanistik Digital", which we want to present, should lead to the elimination and bridging of gaps and shortcomings in online learning. It is not just about a temporary solution to the current situation, but its focus is on sustainable changes and improvement of the German language teaching quality, in order to reflect the new digital age.

Therefore, the intention is to create a platform for the online provision of German studies, which will offer freely available teaching materials for the core subjects of German studies. The attention is also paid, *inter alia*, to the development of students' learning competences and individual learning progress.

Keywords—University Education, learning in the on-line environment, improvement of the quality of learning, competence development.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ever-evolving digital society needs to open up new ways of learning.

However, the Corona-crisis has unveiled the fact that many higher education institutions and courses have not been and are not sufficiently adapted to the digital age. The rapid transition to makeshift online teaching has been accompanied with additional difficulties. Many core subjects and professional seminars lack suitable digitized teaching materials. However, digital content can be more than a temporary solution in crisis situations, as it can open up new opportunities in the current situation, individualization and differentiation of teaching. From our perspective, students' experiences with different forms of digital interaction and their already existing learning environment should be linked to academic learning and the learning environment at the universities.

The objectives of the project Erasmus+ 2020-1-SK01-KA226-HE-094271 called "Germanistik Digital", which is coordinated by the Department of German Studies at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia ¹,

Hornáček Banášová, Monika
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Slovakia

¹ In cooperation with the Departments of German Studies of the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic, the University of Maribor, Slovenia, the University of Vilnius, Lithuania, Ventspils Augstskola, Latvia, the University of Belgrade, Serbia.

and which we want to introduce in this paper and justify its importance in teaching practice, should lead to the elimination and bridging of the above-mentioned shortcomings and gaps. The focus is on sustainable change and improvement of the quality of German language teaching in order to meet the new challenges of the digital age.

Therefore, we plan to develop and apply free and online learning and teaching materials that comprehensively support the development of a range of key competences related to the professional competence of German Studies graduates.

II. IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL COMPETENCES IN THE TEACHING PROCESS

Supporting and developing the digital competences of educators who will be working with digitized teaching materials appears to be a priority, as learner engagement and motivation is highly dependent on their further learning and ability to make meaningful use of new technologies.

The expert study of the conditions of teaching with the help of new technologies is still rather a challenge in current scientific publications, especially in the field of university level of education science.

Bajtoš [1] uses in the field of higher education in Slovakia the term concept of the teaching process, which is a broader term than the teaching method. It includes the systematic use of several methods of the teaching process and also addresses the challenges of some of its other factors, e.g. teaching conditions, its objectives, curriculum selection, didactic principles, organizational forms and material resources. What is important is the peculiarity in the approach to the teaching process, which will enable the development of students' ability to work independently, to learn rationally and to adapt flexibly to the conditions. Bajtoš classifies as current concepts of the teaching process at universities:

- **Program teaching:** the learning is broken down into sequential, successive steps. In each step, the student is required to be active. Learning is strengthened by immediate verification that each step has been completed correctly.
- **E-learning (electronic learning):** is carried out by means of information and communication technologies. The aim is to achieve through e-learning a better educational process.
- **Activity-based teaching:** Emphasizes students' autonomy in planning, implementing and evaluating

their own activities. The priority is that students understand the purpose of their work and that they feel responsible for it. Also the position of a teacher is changed here, who will advise them in their activities and to evaluate their work.

- **Problem-solving learning:** the teacher does not provide knowledge to students in a ready-made form, but puts before them tasks that contain unknown knowledge to them and ways of action, motivates them, guides them to find ways and means of solving tasks, in the search for which students acquire new knowledge and skills and simultaneously develop their competences. The teacher shall provide the conditions for students' problem-solving learning by setting up a system of problem situations and guiding the students' through the problem-solving process. It is an activity of students aimed at the development of knowledge and ways of action through the analysis of problem situations, the formulation of problems and the solution of hypotheses and their verification [2].
- **Creative-Humanistic Teaching:** During classes the student should not only learn the topic, but the teaching should also be connected with humane aspects - so that there is no stress, there are good relations between students and the teacher, that the curiosity, cooperation, and the desire to know more is prevailing in the classroom. In this way, students not only obtain knowledge, but also learn freedom, responsibility and creativity.

There are many teaching methods. When choosing a teaching method, several aspects have to be considered, which are applicable in the conditions of digitalization of teaching.

A current and fundamental challenge is student-centered learning, with the so-called learning in reverse, referred to in English as the "flipped classroom", proving to be a suitable innovative method. This is a method of integrated learning in which the teacher and student have reversed roles, i.e. the content of the curriculum is created by the student in his/her preparation and then it is applied in the school (online) environment. This way of teaching, using contemporary didactic approaches, ICT and collaborative practices, can better meet the learning needs of students on the one hand and on the other hand lead to the adaptation of curricula to the 21st century.

When considering the implementation of this idea, we also draw on the recommendations of the European Commission - the Commission Communication on new approaches to education of November 20, 2012, as well as more recent documents: the Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning [3] or the Council Recommendation of May 22, 2019 on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning (2019/C 189/03, references at the end of the paper). I will quote from the latter document: "New ways of learning need to be explored for a

society that is becoming increasingly mobile and digital. In particular digital developments allow for more and more languages to be learned and practiced outside the classroom and curricula. Current assessment procedures do not fully reflect these developments [4]." Taking these recommendations into account, we decided to consider the innovative practices planned in the context of the digital age as well as open and inclusive education and to address these current practices in the project.

Our second priority focuses on the facts and results of the 2020 study "OECD Skills Strategy Slovak Republic: Assessment and Recommendations", according to which only 37% of students aged 25-34 in Slovakia have completed tertiary studies. It is a common reality, and all the institutions involved in the project confirm this, that there is a relatively high number of students who drop out each year, which can also be attributed to the inadequate training of students entering their first year of tertiary studies. Therefore, we would also like this project to respond in a targeted way to the sometimes very different level of foreign language competence that freshmen students are bringing, and also to try to bridge the gap between the existing foreign language competence and the required (metalinguistic) subject competence. The proposed intellectual outcomes of the project and other planned activities therefore focus on 5 of the 8 key competences already defined in the 2006 European Reference Framework of Key Competences for life-long learning, e.g. native and foreign language competences, IT and learning competences, and cultural consciousness and expression. The development of these competences can be intentionally and strategically linked to the preparation for professional competences as a teacher, interpreter, translator, cultural mediator, etc. within the context of German studies. Our second priority, addressing the skills gaps and differences in students' aptitudes resulting from foreign language competences, is ideally linked to the development of innovative practices that we foresee in the digital age and can be instrumentalized appropriately. Also, the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a Comprehensive Approach to Language Teaching and Learning states that "Integrated Learning, i.e. teaching subjects through a foreign language, and digital and online tools for language learning have proven efficient for different categories of learners. Language teachers across Europe could benefit from continuous professional development in both updating their digital competence and learning how they can best support their teaching practice by using different methodologies and new technologies. An inventory of open educational resources could support them in this, taking into account the work of the Council of Europe [4]."

III. ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

Considering the fact that the project is being put in the context of the Corona-crisis, doing so it seeks to address new challenges that all universities are currently facing. As a

starting point for mapping the current situation, we used a small survey sent to a number of potential partners with questions such as:

How was teaching at your university during the Corona crisis? Are there online courses or teaching materials at your university that you have had access to?

If so, in which topics and on which platforms?

What did you miss in the process of implementing online teaching?

For which specific courses would you like to see online teaching materials offered? Do you have experience in developing online materials?

All the partners selected for the project are providing online learning using common platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, MS Teams, and BigBlueButton. They also report that there are few or no online courses that they have access to at their universities. Most courses and teaching materials are better suited for self-study (exam preparation materials, recommended reading, etc.), allowing for no or limited interactivity to enrich teaching and learning. These materials are also often not planned for online teaching and live interaction. Many teachers also do not have an appropriate methodology for developing lesson and have little experience with evaluation, testing and reviewing in an online environment. Surprisingly, the need for online materials has become apparent in almost all areas of the German study subjects, ranging from basic subjects such as introduction to German studies, practical language exercises (especially oral communication), grammar, text analysis, textual linguistics, literature and regional studies, foreign language didactics, up to specialized subjects such as sociolinguistics or business German.

Our primary goal is therefore to respond to these needs in a targeted way, in particular by creating new quality teaching content that would be up to date and suitable for the changed learning environment, as well as by developing recommendations for the modification and adaptation of other existing teaching materials for online teaching and methodological advice that could also be useful for other disciplines and study programmes. These teaching materials should contribute to the qualitative enhancement of online teaching, meet the demands of the digital age and also contribute to the transformation of teaching processes in the 21st century.

When implementing this objective, synergies within the partnership can be very well utilized, as the experts of the different institutes complement each other in their subject areas and the partners are also differently advanced in the development of online courses, so that they can exchange best practices, which can lead to innovation in the teaching materials developed.

However, in our opinion, the digitalization of teaching itself is not enough to innovate the learning of German. In fact, the partners share similar experiences in other contexts, as the answers in the second part of our survey showed. A major

problem is the variability of foreign language competences (high school graduates with a low level of German (A1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference) and increasingly rarely with B1+ or B2 level) and the lack of learning competences of freshmen students, and these differences often lead to drop-out (the number of drop-outs has increased from 22% to 47% in the last two years). We believe that the development and innovation of teaching materials can also take this aspect into account, which led us to select the second priority for the area in question. In doing so, we want to take advantage of the fact that freshmen students have a lot of experience with digital and social media, but cannot use it for learning. The new materials should also serve as a tool for greater differentiation and individualization of teaching, which, together with an appropriate methodology, could lead to overcoming the above-mentioned differences and skills gaps.

Two target groups may directly benefit from this project. There are students, whose competences in foreign language, subject and digital skills need to be developed in a targeted way on the one hand, and on the other hand, there are teachers, who have to adapt their teaching environment to the new situation by developing it according to the opportunities of the digital age.

IV. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Our ambition is to work towards eliminating and overcoming the shortcomings and gaps in teaching that have arisen from the current situation and from the analysis of needs. It is not just a temporary solution to the current situation, but the focus is on sustainable change and on the improvement of the quality of foreign language teaching, specifically German, which should be appropriate to the new digital age.

With this objective in mind, the intellectual outputs of the project - teaching materials adapted to teaching in a digital environment and methodological recommendations for the preparation of such teaching materials - are planned. As part of the planned activities, international training and various teaching and learning activities are also planned. The implementation and validation of the prepared teaching materials directly in the classroom is already ensured throughout the project implementation. These newly developed online materials will be tested and directly implemented in the teaching at the participating universities in the form of a combined mobility, in which selected students of German studies from the project partnership will participate in person, while the other students will participate online via streaming sessions. In this way, we will contribute to the improvement of professional language competences and German study competences in the target group of German studies students already during project implementation. The digital competences of the students will also be strengthened, as they will learn how to make effective use of the online resources provided for study and self-study. This naturally

develops their learning competences as well. The international orientation of the learning activities, especially during the mobility phases abroad - but also before and after that - will strengthen the students' intercultural competences as well as their ability to cooperate internationally. Moreover, motivation to study German and German Studies is expected to increase, which can be seen as a further measure against dropping out. The newly designed learning environment and innovative teaching conditions should also contribute to the higher quality and attractiveness of the German studies program. Apart from improving the quality of the program, the focus will be on competence development and the needs of students and partner institutions will be taken into account.

The same applies to the target group of teachers. The international aspect of the project gives the project staff the opportunity to develop their professional competences in the field of foreign language didactics and university didactics through participation in training courses, through the exchange of best practices, but also through learning-by-doing in the development and implementation of new teaching materials and in the drafting of a methodological guide. As a result of the adoption of digital technologies as a tool for innovative teaching and topic focus, the digital competences of teachers will be also enhanced.

Furthermore, the intellectual outputs of the project will be made available to all interested students and teachers after the project is completed and to some extent also during its implementation, not only within the framework of the strategic partnership, but also in all departments of German Studies in Europe, but also around the world. Students will be able to utilize freely accessible materials for their studies and also the student forums set up to exchange learning experiences and challenges, and teachers will have access to online resources and also methodological advice and a framework guidelines for the implementation of online teaching. The design of the outputs is thus planned to be utilized not only within the strategic partnership, but also in a wider European (and global) context at other universities.

V. INNOVATION IN ONLINE LEARNING – CURRENT CHALLENGES

A. *Online teaching materials*

The analysis of needs shows that the greatest current challenge is the lack of appropriate materials for online teaching. During the Corona-crisis, when teachers had to move to online teaching, many improvised or temporarily adapted their existing teaching materials without being able to make effective use of the digital environment, often due to a lack of digital literacy. Teachers and students had few online courses available, which are often limited and also not in line with the idea of Open Educational Resources (OER). Although there are a number of free online materials for learning German in general, there are no comparable materials that provide subject knowledge in the field of German studies. A few existing materials do not match students' learning behavior and do not support their frequently weak learning competences.

Therefore, the teaching materials and assignments being developed focus on practical support for online teaching. They are intended to provide extensive support for online learning, intentionally utilizing the opportunities of the digital space and responding to the needs of students. There is also a need for modernization and innovation of the teaching environment, as new students are already part of the digital natives' generation and the digital environment has become part of their everyday life, which is not taken into account in traditional teaching.

The aim is therefore to create a platform with online teaching materials (lectures, exercises, interactive tasks) that would meet the discussed needs. The primary target groups are students of the German Studies and teachers of the project partnership, and after the project is completed, all German Studies departments across Europe. Additionally, the output may also reach other students learning German. The specific topic focuses are the result of an analysis of the curricula of all partners, so it is safe to say that the materials will be applicable in the European area. The innovative character stems from the present-day orientation towards the development of foreign language, subject and teaching competences in a digital environment. The new teaching materials are also open not only for use in distance learning but also for self-study, which encourages students' own initiative in online learning. The fact that the teaching materials are not tied to a single platform (e.g. Moodle, MS Teams), but seek to be open in terms of open source and envisage the utilization of existing media channels and social media, further innovation and wider accessibility is achieved.

Due to the above reasons, we expect the following:

- support for effective and modern online teaching of German studies,
- the use of teaching materials as a substitute for face-to-face teaching when necessary (e.g. in crisis situations) or as regular materials for distance learning (off-site study),
- help with self-directed learning and closing gaps in students' competences,
- individualization of teaching, allowing students to learn at their own pace,
- increased motivation to learn, to which the variety and flexibility of the teaching material should contribute,
- better adaptation of teaching to the everyday experiences of so called digital natives,
- greater accessibility of learning materials thanks to open learning platforms, especially for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who, for example, cannot afford to travel abroad,
- addressing the differences in foreign language proficiency, thereby reducing the number of students who do not complete their studies due to problems with language requirements.

B. *Methodological guide for working with online teaching materials*

The majority of today's teachers in the tertiary sector belong to the generation of so-called digital migrants, i.e. they have

not been socialized into the world of digital media and have only acquired the relevant competences later in their working lives. They also do not have own experience in teaching with utilization of information and communication technologies. Their teaching methods are focused on traditional teaching. Moreover, many teachers in the tertiary sector are not graduated in teachers study and have never studied the didactics of foreign languages. Even graduate teachers are mostly only familiar with didactics in secondary schools. University didactics is only slowly gaining attention. These facts lead us to the need to prepare a guide in the form of a methodology. Our research during the analysis of needs also revealed a lack of methodological advice and tips. With regard to teaching during the new pandemic situation, teachers reported that online teaching was very challenging for them, especially in terms of adapting and conducting online lessons. For most of them, this meant doubling their preparation for teaching, which is also why most of them do not dare to take this step.

In order to facilitate this situation and the work of teachers and to provide them with theoretical knowledge adapted to university teaching in an online environment, together with practical experience and practical methodological recommendations, a joint publication will be produced within the project, containing recommended curricula and methodology for the implementation of teaching materials with online support.

The primary target group of this output should be the teaching staff of the Institutes of German Language and Literature, especially those who teach sub-disciplines of German language, and who have to teach students not general foreign language competence, but in particular the terminology and subject knowledge. This target group can be understood in both a European and a non-European context, since German language institutes exist all over the world.

This output of the project is intended to complement the aforementioned teaching materials and also to demonstrate the methodology for the development and production of such teaching materials through practical examples and illustrate their implementation in the teaching environment. Teaching German language and literature usually involves the use of textbooks or university lecture notes, for which, unlike with classical textbooks of German as a foreign language, there are no methodological guides, not to mention methodologies for online teaching. In this context, the output will be unique and novel.

Our ambition is not to develop a theoretical publication, thus this publication will be different from professional publications on didactics or university didactics. The combination of theoretical knowledge with examples from practice shall contribute to the innovative character of the project output. Another innovation is that the output is produced in a bottom-up process, so that it is not just an application of theoretical knowledge - but recommendations and tips are formulated on the basis of experience from the

implementation and development of teaching materials. The publication can therefore also be innovative and beneficial in the field of university didactics.

Among the expected effects of the publication is, in particular, overcoming the gap between professional competences and digital or didactic competences, i.e. it is about expanding the university didactic competences of teachers in the 21st century. On a practical level, it is expected that with the help of this publication, teachers will be able to acquire an insight into the most important focal points of the curriculum in the teaching of German studies, enabling them to individually develop online lessons, i.e., inter alia, the teaching materials can be used in the most appropriate methodological way. It is also assumed that teachers can learn to develop their own teaching materials using the outputs of the project.

C. Importance of sharing experiences

A reliable tool for verifying the quality of the prepared teaching materials is their direct implementation in real teaching. For this reason, we have also planned mixed mobility of university students, German language and literature students of all participants within the framework of the project. This is a combination of online and real mobility. Within the framework of online mobility, the project partners are planning joint online offerings (lectures and workshops), which are offered within the framework of the strategic partnership. In principle, students from other universities will be able to use the prepared teaching materials in their own teaching or to take entire courses via videoconferencing and streaming (via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.), which will be led by experts in the respective German studies disciplines within the framework of the partnership.

An additional dimension will be real student mobility, which will take place once a semester at one of the universities. This mobility shall involve selected students from each of the partner universities, who will be able to attend classes for a full week together with local students and turn previous virtual acquaintances and experiences into real ones.

Methodologically, we shall focus in particular on the aforementioned flipped classroom, in which pupils first learn the learning content on their own (with the help of the learning resources created within the project framework) and then they will implement and discuss it practically in the classroom. This not only develops and strengthens students' subject competences but also their learning competences. The way in which foreign language competences are developed is thus determined by the learners' current proficiency level.

Before, during and after the whole activity, feedback from pupils and teachers is collected via interviews, questionnaires and evaluations and subsequently it is evaluated. The feedback serves as a basis for decisions making related to the planning, adjustment and development of further teaching materials and exercises, and are also needed as 'best practice' in the development of methodological recommendations.

Within the framework of mixed mobility, innovative elements shall be also introduced into the classroom. In

addition to the flipped learning methodology, where the traditional teaching space should be transformed into a learning space, there is the initiation of international groups of learners. These are to be formed using the usual social media and networks preferred by the respective group. The idea is that students will enter into international exchanges with other students with whom they share not only a common subject (namely German Studies) but also similar interests, problems, challenges, etc. Since a total of 6 countries are involved, it may lead to an interesting enrichment of learning that goes hand in hand with the development of intercultural and teamwork skills. In doing so, German as a foreign language will create the basis for common communication so that it can be transformed from a theoretical subject context into a practical communication.

D. Positive contribution of the planned activities with regard to the target groups

The expected effect of the described activities is primarily the development of professional competences of students of German studies, which can be linked to the successful experience in learning and may lead to increased motivation for their own further education and training. This is facilitated in particular by the adaptation of the teaching conditions to the learning habits of the students and the digital environment that young people are confronted with on a daily basis.

Furthermore, through targeted forms of exercises and methodological instructions, students' learning competences are expanded and supported, which are important for the successful completion of their university studies and their adaptation to the teaching process at university is facilitated. Due to the integration of the teaching materials into the teaching practice already within implementation of the project, it can be assumed that the students will be able to utilize the results immediately.

In addition, planned open educational resources in the form of a universally accessible platform of online learning materials can significantly improve learning opportunities for students with special needs or disabilities, who usually need an individual learning plan.

The planned mixed mobility of students within the framework of the strategic partnership also leads to increased motivation to learn, thanks to the international orientation and networking of the students, their social contacts are strengthened and, in particular, intercultural competences are developed. This already takes place in the online communication phase between students; through personal mobility the students acquire further experience with different educational systems.

The teaching staff of the participating Institutes of German Language and Literature benefit from participation in the development of the project outputs and its implementation, as well as from joint training sessions. These activities are leading to an increase in their own digital competences, which are essential for modern teaching. Moreover, teachers will

enhance their subject didactic competences and acquire specific knowledge and skills in the field of university didactics and in relation to online teaching, individualization and differentiation of teaching and working with heterogeneous groups of learners. It should not be forgotten that working in mixed international project teams increases the experiential horizon of the project participants. They will learn about different country-specific teaching styles and the exchange of best practices can lead to improvements in their own teaching. These effects also have a direct impact on teachers' further professional development.

The implementation of the project can have a significant impact on the development of lessons in terms of innovation, digitization, modernization, individualization and differentiation also for teachers of other foreign language, not only from the participating countries.

Another target groups are university teachers from other fields, who may find useful the general methodological recommendations, the typology of exercises, the way of presenting teaching materials in the online environment and especially the practical experience of the project participants, which, within the dissemination of the results, will be communicated externally. The general methodology for online teaching, which will also be available in translations into national language, will offer in this respect also practical possibilities for application and transfer. The curricula of the online lessons and the materials developed are directly transferable to other countries and other German Study institutes outside the project partnership. The teaching materials can also be adapted for other languages and philological fields. The proposed methodologies, new ideas and forms of lesson development are also transferable to other fields of study.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bajtoš, *Didaktika vysokej školy*. Bratislava: Iura Edition, 2015, p.118.
- [2] M. Droščák, *Úvod do všeobecnej didaktiky pre študentov učiteľstva*. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2015, p.111.
- [3] The Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=en](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=en)
- [4] The Council Recommendation of May 22, 2019 on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)&rid=7](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02)&rid=7)

The idea of online learning materials for German studies with a clear practical meaning is not only innovative, but also responds to a number of current phenomena and needs in the context of tertiary education, not only with regard to the pandemic situation. The new teaching materials will modernize teaching and adapt it to the digital age.