Transcending Borders – Diversity and Standardization

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Abstract

Even though computers have now been used in foreign language teaching for many years, there are only few verified insights into the actual learning processes and the efficacy of this method. Didactic concepts are mainly based on the transfer of conventional methods onto the use of the new medium. Thus it is legitimate to investigate what potential the so-called new media actually have to offer. One promising area is increasing the effectiveness of language teaching through self-learning concepts and cooperative forms of learning. Concerning this aspect in particular, learner groups with a certain heterogeneity are to be preferred over highly homogeneous learner groups. Possibilities of authentic foreign language use can then arise in cooperative learning arrangements, and efficacy thus usually increases. On the other hand, the actual use of computers in language learning settings requires a highly reliable technical base, which in turn requires a great degree of standardisation. This paper illustrates the framework of the technical possibilities of the new media and the resulting potential for a more effective teaching of foreign languages.

Some technical aspects of standardization and diversity

The use of computers in foreign language teaching relies to a particularly great extent on the way the technology develops. A brief look at the incredibly fast development that has occurred over the last 50 years will show the overall lines of development. This will give us an idea of the decisive moments within the wealth of facts and will enable us to identify the central aspects relevant for L2-teaching.

Initially, as computers became more powerful they also became bigger, whereas later they became simultaneously ever more powerful and ever smaller. To begin with, mainframes filled entire halls and required both powerful air-conditioning units and large teams of computer operators. The introduction of PCs in the early 1980s wrought a decisive change. These computers were ‘personal’ in that they were fully functional while of a size that fit on a desk. Thus computing power was accessible to individuals and independent from an on-line connection to the mainframe. These PCs were accompanied by new computer software, which laid the foundations for the now customary Office programs, with which normal people without a computing degree or special computer training could write texts on the computer (Grießhaber 1998a). The 1990s introduced the linking-up of the many independent computers in Local Area Networks (LAN) and, in particular, through the Internet. As a result, completely new types of programs and uses of computers came into being, such as e-mail or online encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia. In the 21st century, smartphones and multimedia players are demonstrating a further minimization of computers, which now fit into a shirt pocket. However, compared to desktop computers and laptops, these new high-tech devices are not really being regarded as computers as yet, even though they, in particular, create a completely new dimension of computer-assisted L2 learning.
From a functional perspective two aspects are of particular relevance for foreign language teaching: on the one hand multi-media with standardized formats and on the other hand the world-wide network of the Internet. As is often the case, military projects formed the basis for the development of the Internet. The first forerunner of the Internet, the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (Arpanet), was developed for the American Ministry of Defence in the 1960s. This network also formed the basis for the nowadays ubiquitous e-mailing. Actually, the basis of e-mail technology was developed as a matter of convenience and in order to bypass the strict regulations that existed for direct or phone contact between the researchers. In contrast to this desire for communication, restrictions were purposefully included during the development and standardization of the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII-Code) in 1968. Thus diacritic signs used in (Eastern) European languages were intentionally excluded in order to shield the Net against the 'hostile' Eastern bloc. Up till quite recently, this division fragmented the users of the Internet into various language islands. Though unhindered international exchange of information was basically possible, the fragmented script situation made this communication difficult if not impossible. German umlauts had to be rendered as two graphemes in ASCII, for example. For Chinese, two different character sets existed, namely Big 5 and GB. It was not until the enactment of the Unicode standard that different sets of characters could be mixed so that it is no longer problematic to combine Asian pictorial scripts with Latin alphabet scripts. This standardization and the creation of the Hypertext Transport Protocols (http) form the basis of the familiar and boundless Internet. Thus we can be in Taiwan and nevertheless visit European Internet pages, look through weblogs or check out the menu of the Münster University canteen. It is clear how new technological possibilities open up new functions. And it is only over the course of time that the standards develop which in turn make the new functions accessible to all. Without this standardization, important ways of using computers would be closed to us.

The second important standardization in the field of media integration is characterized by these polarities, too. JPG and GIF are now clearly established as the standard formats for graphic information. Similar standardization – though not quite to the same extent - exists for digital video. Thus is now possible to present the target language in text, audio, picture and video format. Without the corresponding standards this would not be possible. For us, who are not, as a rule, computer experts, it is particularly satisfactory that we can utilize these possibilities without the need for any specialized knowledge. And it is of similar importance that we can use these multi-media services with the elegant little smartphones, too. We can use them to read German newspapers via the Internet while in Taiwan, listen to German-language radio programmes and download and view podcasts. For the use in foreign language teaching we have thus attained a previously unheard-of degree of variety and topicality of target language material we can present in class.

Aspects of L2-Acquisition

In order to assess the didactic possibilites of the use of computers in foreign language teaching we should now take a look at how young adults actually acquire a foreign language. Even though the complex processes involved are not yet known in
detail, there are a number of important research results (Doughty & Long 2003, Lightbown & Spada 2006, Grießhaber 2001a). The most important insight is that the target language itself has to be used in the teaching process in order for productive language skills to be imparted. For German and English as target language there are also now well-documented findings that demonstrate that the structural basis of the L2 is acquired independently of individual variables in fixed sequences (Diehl et al 2000, Grießhaber 2006a, 2006b, Pienemann 1998). For German, the position of the finite and infinite verbs and parts of verbs is decisive (table 1 for German, table 2 for English).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Acquisition stage</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>subclauses with verb in final position</td>
<td>..., dass er so schwarz ist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>finite verb after subject (inversion)</td>
<td>Dann brennt die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>separation of finite &amp; non-finite verb elements</td>
<td>Der Nikolaus hat das gesagt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>simple sentences with finite verb</td>
<td>Ich versteh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>fragmentary utterances without finite verb</td>
<td>Anziehn Ge/</td>
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Table 1: Acquisition stages for German according to Grießhaber (2006a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Acquisition stage: morph., syntax</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>subordinate clause procedure: cancel INV</td>
<td>I wonder where he has gone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SV agreement (= 3sg-s), Do2nd, Aux2nd</td>
<td>Where has he gone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S-procedure: Yes/No inversion, PS inv:</td>
<td>Has he seen you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>phrasal procedure: NP agreement</td>
<td>He eats at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>category procedure: plural / possessive pro.</td>
<td>two dogs / my house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>word / lemma: ‘words’, invariant forms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Acquisition stages for English according to Pienemann (1998)

These sequences cannot be changed at will through language teaching. Though it is possible to present complex structures in the teaching environment, neither cognitive insight nor rote learning lead to a normatively correct use in a spoken context. This can be demonstrated with the third person ‘s’ rule in English. The rule that an ‘s’ is added to the third person singular form is clearly a simple one. However, German learners of English make many mistakes in this area. A look at the acquisition sequences tells us that this structurally simple rule is not acquired until level 5 out of six possible levels. Important is therefore not so much the structural simplicity or complexity of the rule itself, but its interaction with the mental planning and realisation of the utterance within the act of speaking. Thus, if a rule from a later acquisition sequence is taught earlier, the learners can learn it as they would a mathematical rule but they cannot use it freely in spontaneously spoken discourse.

This has far-reaching consequences for L2-teaching. Curricula and teaching materials should adapt to the target language acquisition processes in order to support the learning process in the best possible manner and in order to avoid overtaxing the learners. Furthermore, it has to be remembered that corrections of learner utterances will only be effective if the learner is at the right stage in his language development. If
a learner on level 1 makes mistakes that belong to level 4, then correcting these mistakes will be of little use. The learner cannot integrate the complex requirements of the higher level into his utterances yet. On the other hand the development stages help to assess what language level an individual learner or a group of learners has achieved. Thus course preparation can reflect the actual stage of the learners even no textbook series is used.

Thirdly, there is wide-spread empirical evidence that grammatical structures are acquired not so much through cognitive learning and using of rules but rather through extensive input and active production of target language utterances (Griesshaber 2006b). This correlation can also be seen in the studies of Hegelheimer & Tower 2004 on the use of a typical foreign language learning program, for example. They had learners use a typical multi-media program for English and recorded every action of the learners. The better learners completed more tasks per unit of time and achieved more correct answers than the weaker group. Better learners in particular made use of the repeat function, i.e. they listened to parts of dialogues more often. The weaker learners, on the other hand, used the written text as a key to comprehension more frequently. Thus it becomes apparent here, too, that the better learners exposed themselves to more auditive input, whereas the textual input, which supported comprehension more, did not lead to a better acquisition of the language. The learner has to try to get a feel for the sound of the foreign language, to try to guess meanings and to be able to deal with a certain degree of uncertainty. This could also be observed in our computer lab with the similarly constructed multi-media programs from the Berlitz Think and Talk series (Griesshaber 2003).

This aspect might also help explain why it can frequently be observed that Chinese foreign language learners have differing degrees of competences with regard to the four main language skills. Their written skills are usually far better developed than their oral skills. A learner’s written skills may be on Level B2 of the Common European Framework, for example, but the speaking skills on the lower Level A2. What might be the reason? From a purely phonetic perspective the Chinese language does not have much greater problems than the typologically distant Turkish, for example, if we consider consonant clusters or the distinctive German vowel length (see Hachenberg 2003). One explanation, it seems to me, could be connected to the Chinese pictorial script and culture of writing. Chinese learners are told over years to focus on the written language, which helps differentiate the numerous homonyms. The inner relationship of script and spoken communication appears to have a different functional alignment than in the European alphabet languages. This might help explain the stronger orientation of Chinese learners on written language. Here, also, too little auditive input and too little oral language practice might lead to lesser-developed oral skills. According to the insights into L2-acquisition presented above, the relatively small input might play a role.

This assumption is underlined by the studies of Piske 2006 and Piske et al. 2001, who come to the conclusion that frequent and regular use of the target language and – in particular in the initial language learning phase – much authentic input are essential for the development of pronunciation. Thus, providing easier access to the target language as well as an interesting, authentic presentation of the target language could help improve learners’ oral skills.
The existing results of research into L2-acquisition can be summarized as follows: successful learners acquire a large number of target language means and can extrapolate grammar rules out of this large input both subconsciously and successfully. Our most important goals should therefore be: an attractive presentation of the target language which encourages the learner to access information in the target language and to communicate in the target language. Considering the enormous geographical distance between China and Europe, the role of the new media cannot be emphasized enough.

**Computers in L2-teaching**

The insights of research into second language acquisition point to the particularly interesting functions of computers with regard to their use in foreign language teaching. To this end I will first of all consider the technical aspects and functions once again. The new laptops with their flexible use enable new co-operative learning formats, which support autonomous learning. In a third step the interaction of learners in co-operative study groups will be analyzed, in particular the way in which they react to the format of each other’s language utterances. After the discussion of co-operative study forms, individual usage of the new smartphones will be considered. Finally, I will turn to the problem that learners within more free and autonomous learning formats do not possess a sufficient awareness of their language progress and therefore prefer familiar, conventional study settings.

Technological basis, developments and learning formats

First of all, the computer is a tool for producing texts, for creating and holding presentations etc. This function as a tool is, however, less important than the possibilities of multi-media presentation of the target language and of the communication with other learners and with native speakers. When computers are used, then one of these functions can dominate or be used separately, or they can all be combined. The table compiled by Warschauer 2000 gives a good overview of main didactic stages developments of the use of computers. Table 3 presents Warschauer’s three stages with modifications by Grießhaber 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: The Three Stages of CALL (Warschauer 2000; modifications Grießhaber 2007: in italics)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internet</strong></td>
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<td><strong>English Teaching</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paradigm</strong></td>
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<td><strong>View of Language interact.</strong></td>
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As regards technology, Warschauer’s compilation has to be modified in an important way. Even though computer labs or language labs nowadays often still consist of numerous linked-up workstations with flat screens, laptops and smartphones with wireless Internet connections are more suitable. In the courses at the Sprachenzentrum the fixed PCs have gradually been replaced by laptops with WLAN since the beginning of the 21st century (Grießhaber 2001b). They are taken out of their cupboards whenever the teacher wishes to use them. It takes little time to get them up and running, similar to permanently installed PCs. One advantage of the laptops is, however, that they do not distract learners while they are not in use. The second advantage is that they enable much more flexible social interaction in the classroom. The layout of permanently installed PCs determines the possible communicative possibilities in a computer language lab (see Grießhaber 1998b). Laptops, on the other hand, offer far more flexible possibilities. The learners can either work on their own with a laptop – assuming enough laptops are available but that is a different matter. Learners can also work at a computer with one or two partners. Co-operative partner work, in particular, is very useful for exploiting the target language interaction potential during the use of computers to its fullest. Due to the WLAN-connections, which nowadays work very reliably, the learners have unlimited access to the Internet, they can exchange information amongst themselves and, via screen-sharing, can also make information they have just compiled accessible to other learners on their screens or via a beamer to the whole group. Under these technical conditions, the computer takes a step back until it is utilized for certain tasks within the teacher’s didactic concept and is later put back in its cupboard. The computer becomes a medium that is used for a specific didactic purpose just like a blackboard, a textbook or an overhead projector – no more and no less (see also Grießhaber 2003).

**Autonomous, co-operative learning formats**

The changed possibilities for use have resulted in new learning formats, which will now be presented. It is, of course, possible to use this new technology for conventional learning formats and exercises. This is generally the case when new technology is introduced. First of all familiar classroom activities are put into practice using the new technology until new types of activities develop out of the increased possibilities. This is the reason why drill and practice exercises dominated early on and were realised more or less directly with the new media. Similarly, it is possible to use the Internet in a conventional fashion: the learners are to carry out specific tasks devised by the teacher concerning specified websites. They are, for example, to visit the homepage of a museum, find out its opening hours in the foreign language, note them down or copy them and present them in tabular form. In theory, this is also possible with print media. The really interesting opportunities which working with computers has to offer are thus wasted to some extent, however.

However, if we first of all provide the learners with the means of working in the
Internet and then give them access to its boundless realm, then we should also allow them – within a certain framework, of course – to look for information in the target language independently. This is when different interests and preferences will become apparent: some will be more interested in music and related information, whereas for others it will be a certain sport or unfamiliar aspects of the foreign culture that are of interest. The learners should be allowed to follow these interests, as long as they do so in the target language. The ensuing diversity of interests is not a shortcoming but a splendid gift which the teacher can make use of didactically.

First of all we profit from the fact that the learners follow their – admittedly diverse – interests. If the motivation for dealing with information in the target language stems from the learner’s own interests, then he/she will deal with it much more intensively and the language input increases. In this way, as discussed above, language competence also increases. If we let the learners work on different topics, then they will also attain different results. This, in turn, makes the presentation of these results in the learner groups much more interesting as neither teacher nor fellow students know what is going to be presented. This distinguishes project-oriented co-operative language teaching fundamentally from traditional language teaching. The use of the target language is given a certain functionality. The aim is no longer to demonstrate to the teacher that one has internalized a certain grammar rule but to inform one’s communication partners about something new to them. This is a strong motivation for the development of language skills.

Initially, teachers are often sceptical whether this can work; after all, they think they know their learners. But it should be taken into account that learners who are given a restrictive framework can only operate within that framework. When, on the other hand, they are given the opportunity to work more independently, they tend to use the possibilities given to them, if only because they are curious. So how can such project-oriented learning formats be introduced successfully? In this context, the concept of the WebQuest and Leni Dam’s autonomous language learning approach will now be presented.

The concept of the WebQuest, which has been developed by Dodge since the mid-90s, works as follows: the learners are given a task to solve for which they have to collect, analyze and process information and present their results:

„A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing. There are at least two levels of WebQuests that should be distinguished from one another.” (Dodge 1997)

Dodge differentiates between Short Term WebQuests for approx. 1 to 3 lessons and Longer Term WebQuests for about 1 week to 1 month. For both types Dodge 2002 suggests six aspects for the creation of WebQuests (see also Wagner 2007): (a) introduction, typically the description of a scenario and ensuing questions / tasks, e.g. planning a trip to Germany, (b) task, the specification of the product that the learners are to create in the course of the activity, e.g. an itinerary with calculation of time and costs, (c) a set of information sources, these can be tips for the gathering of
information or even specific Internet links, (d) process, i.e. guide-lines on how to break the project down into single steps, (e) guidance for organizing information, i.e. instructions on how the results are to be processed and presented, and, finally, (f) conclusion, a concluding phase of making the learners aware of the knowledge and skills they have acquired.

It becomes clear from these descriptions that this type of self-determined co-operative activity does not give the learners a completely free reign. Rather it is a contract between students and teacher regarding the carrying out of a project. Before the activity starts, the results that are to be achieved are determined and described clearly. It is then up to the student to carry out the activity. Thus, this type of teaching involves much preparation on the side of the teacher. And in spite of thorough preparation, unforeseen surprises and problems can arise. A wonderful Internet site may have vanished or changed so much since it was last viewed that it does not suit the teacher's concept very well any more. These are the vagaries of life, which even language teaching is not always immune to. Finally, conflicts can arise within learner groups which can affect their work massively. At this point the teacher needs to act as team coach. And in particular students always want to know absolutely precisely what they have to do and, especially, how they can get a good grade. The latter is a legitimate student interest, too. For this reason, the phase of grading and evaluation has to be specifically planned from the outset.

Leni Dam 1995 views her concept of autonomous learning as a large step toward even more self-responsibility for the learners. The basis for the concept initially seems quite simple: the teacher only asks questions to which he or she does not know the answer. Due to this principle, the teacher loses his/her all-dominating role. He/She becomes the organizer of learning activities and the learner’s counsellor. Dam places emphasis on five areas of focus when giving the learner more responsibility: (a) a shift in focus from teaching to learning, (b) a change in the learner's role (this changes the focus on teaching to one of learning and results in more openness towards ideas and suggestions made by learners), (c) a change in the teacher's role, (d) the role of evaluation (i.e. things are tried and tested more, learners act as teachers and teachers as learners), and (e) a new view of the language classroom as a rich learning environment. In Dam’s concept the agreed study contract between learners and teacher plays an even greater role than with WebQuests. In particular, the evaluation of the activities that have been carried out plays a decisive role. Over a longer period, my colleague Lienhard Legenhausen, my post-doc assistant Elke Stracke-Elbina and I worked with foreign language teachers from various schools on the topic of the use of computers for autonomous learning activities. Here, too, the typical problems occurred that also occur within the classroom (see Grießhaber et al. 2001). We made progress by posing and jointly discussing the following questions: (a) What have we done so far? (b) Which aims have we formulated regarding our content? What is its relationship to the curriculum? (c) What was good or bad about our decisions/procedures/content? (d) Why have we assessed items the way we have? (e) Which consequences does this have for the next steps?

**Learner language and language awareness**

So what actually happens during learner co-operation at the computer? Do the
learners only pick out the cherries from the wealth of information, or do they actually work on their language skills? I would like to use a short extract from the partner work between two non-German students to illustrate this. They are writing an email together as an answer to their e-mail partners abroad. Lin types the text they have come up with together into the computer. Asi dictates the sentence: „Aber wenn du uns ein Stück [gemeint: Dim Sum] schicken, dann kann ich probieren.“ („But if you send us a piece [of Dim Sum], then I can try.“)

(B 1) Orthography in co-operative text production

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Asi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Asi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lin</td>
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In this short extract from a transcript it is noticeable that Asi initially pronounces the important word Stück without the umlaut. When she sees the word her partner has typed on the screen, however, she notices that is should be spelled „Stück“. She then interrupts Lin and tells her so. Lin on the other hand repeats the word verbally without the umlaut, but spells it with the umlaut, as the typed passage shows: „Aber wenn ihr uns eine Stück schickt, probiert sie gerne.“ [“But if you send us a piece, she will gladly try.”] Even if this passage does not yet entirely conform to target-language rules, it is worth noting that the word they discussed is spelled correctly. This small extract offers various insights: through the combination of writing and speaking the learners are more aware of the written form and in the end write it correctly. Text production appears as a process that leads – via several incorrect stages – to a product. The product is the end result, it does not exist at the beginning of the process. The learners are capable of analysing their utterances with regard to grammatical correctness, and incorrect spoken utterances are not necessarily repeated by the partner. The text concerns real interests of the learners. They do not know Dim Sum yet and let their e-mail partners know that would be willing to try it, should they be sent some. As we can see, it is this own interest that provides the motivation to express own ideas in an understandable way. However, it also becomes apparent that the topic of such an exchange cannot be determined beforehand. All that can be agreed upon in advance is that a product has to be achieved, for example through one e-mail per week etc.

Even after this example, such co-operative, largely autonomous projects will not meet with full and undivided wide-spread approval. In discussions with teachers, scepticism and anxious questions usually prevail initially. Let us simply contrast the passage just presented with conventional teaching. If we assume that Lin and Asi each have to write a text on their own, then they cannot correct each other’s texts. The
increased objectivity towards one’s own utterances which is necessary for a conscious checking of what one has written - and which is created through the partner activity and the medium used - is missing. Mistakes that result from such a lack of objectivity are often classified as mistakes due to carelessness as the learner really should know better. In partner activities there is a greater chance that the learner notices such formal aspects of language. A second point concerns how much time lies between a learner experiencing a problem and the possibility of an interactional discussion of this problem in class. Normally, the learner can at most indicate to the teacher that he has a problem, but must usually wait a while until the teacher can address it. But by then the problem may not be uppermost in the student's mind any more. The assistance the teacher can offer does not address the problem as it occurs. However, the short transcript shows that a problem can be addressed immediately in partner activities so that the discussion of the issue can influence the planning of the utterance and the learner's knowledge of rules. This last observation can be substantiated through empirical studies on the communication in conventional foreign language teaching.

A broad empirical analysis of English lessons in 9th grade in Germany (DESI 2006) showed that the teacher spoke for more than half the class time; in contrast, all the learners together only spoke in the target language for 18% of the lesson. It is clear from this that the individual learner does not get to say more than just a few sentences. This is one of the structural reasons why conventional language teaching comes nowhere near fulfilling its potential. If, however, the learners are split up into different groups that carry out activities simultaneously, this already increases the active participation of each student. And the active use of the target language, as we have already seen, is the key to successful L2 acquisition.

Even though the different forms of self-determined co-operative activities have been shown to lead to good foreign language skills, we can frequently find that the learners does not see this as 'proper learning' but rather as a pleasant but ineffective activity. They may be right if they use conventional, rule-based experience of learning a language as their point of reference: they can use the language appropriately at a level which can be determined but only know the rules they apply implicitly and not cognitively. Conventional teaching, to put it bluntly, basically works the other way: the learners know the rule cognitively but cannot use it in spontaneous discourse. If we take the simple rule of third person singular -s in English - a simple rule, which is difficult to follow. If we seek explanations for the students' unease, then it is clear that the learners miss a yardstick to measure their utterances against. Their feeling for the foreign language is insufficiently developed on account of the limited time they were exposed to the language in school. This is where the cognitive reflection about a language and its rules has its place. Thus in our example the learner Asi uses the linguistic term Umlaut. This tool helps her to deal with the formal aspects of nouns. This grammatical knowledge is useful as a tool.

However, the grammar rules should not serve to process all utterances that deviate from the linguistic norm as this would massively interfere with the learning process. Thus, the final version of the text still contains some mistakes. It represents an interim stage in the learning process and not its final one. But how can we know without a textbook which mistakes should be tackled at which point? In order to find
an answer to this question it is worth taking a look at the acquisition of a foreign language in stages. For German and English teachers can easily assess which acquisition stage the learner has reached. This knowledge can then help to decide which incorrect utterances should be addressed (Griesshaber 2006).

**Individual use of media**

So far I have mainly addressed aspects of foreign language learning within a class framework whereas the learner activities outside of the classroom to prepare for a lesson, for example, have been ignored. For these learning situations outside of school the new, small and currently very elegant smartphones and MP3 players are ideal. They enable the learner to experience the target language both extensively and intensively despite the great geographical distance from Taiwan to Germany. Especially regarding listening comprehension they can provide the learner with essential target language input.

Even if the use of podcasting appears more of a 'promised land' at present as no reliable, emipirical research has yet been undertaken, it is still possible to make some comments based on existing insights and the technological possibilities these devices have to offer. Due to the immense number of podcasts on offer, we and our learners can choose from a veritable sea of authentic target language utterances which appear to be waiting - like Sleeping Beauty - to be kissed awake. Many commercial sites as well as competent amateurs publish downloadable audio recordings in mp3-format on the Internet. These podcasts can be downloaded from the Internet with a computer and transferred onto a small MP3 player. Then the audio or video recordings can be accessed practically anywhere: on the way to university, while jogging or literally when and where the learner wishes. Usually the recordings contain quite complex language which may seem too difficult for beginners. It is thus the task of the teacher to assess the learner's language level and interests and suggest a suitable selection. Unlike textbooks, the vocabulary will contain both lexemes and constructions the learner is not yet familiar with. But that is not a real problem. Native speakers are not familiar with all the lexemes in their native language either. The difference is that they can usually infer them from the context. These mechanisms of inferring meaning and ways of dealing with difficult utterances are what we have to familiarize our learners with. The content of utterances should be the main focus, and not their form. The acquisition of form follows the processing of the content in an adequate linguistic manner.

As with the previously introduced concept of the WebQuest or of autonomous learning, it is not sufficient to simply tell the learner that they should listen to a particular podcast by the following lesson and be able to summarize it in class. Then the students will carry out the task of listening to a podcast merely in order to be able to summarize it. Far better that they should process the contents of the podcast, form their own opinion about it and express this opinion in the target language - albeit with simple language means. The learners should first of all have the possibility to choose a podcast that interests them. If they have a personal interest in the topic, then they will listen to the podcast several times, if necessary, in order to understand it. This is the underlying principle of the audio recordings of the Berlitz method. The learners listen to recordings which cleverly employ noises and voices to help comprehension.
We used such programs with great success around 10 years ago. Language instructors reported that the learners who had worked with these recordings as preparation for a class asked questions concerning language and content, participated actively in class and developed a good receptive language competence. However, we discontinued using these programs at the request of the students as they found the computer graphics too childish and they did not want to work with the programs (see Grießhaber 2003). Despite our negative experiences with certain details of the programs, the underlying concept is still valid.

Now back to podcasts. Extensive lists can be found in iTunes, for example. It is possible to search for languages, providers or topics. My local radio station WDR offers a different topic free of charge every week; in addition to numerous audio recordings, you can often also find the written transcript of the broadcasts. Thus learners can deal with the topics extensively and intensively, even if - as we have already seen - this is not necessarily the best use of the technology. The learners can also use the information to carry out further research and write own contributions. For language beginners, other programmes for children are more useful, such as Lilipuz, for example. Lilipuz does not stand for childish content, but for both serious and fun topics that are presented so that children can understand them. One episode that would be suitable for technicians is, for example, a video programme which explains clearly in simple language how a car navigation system works. This well-illustrated programme may already be enough, or the topic can be dealt with further with more technical language if the learners have sufficient technical knowledge themselves.

There are also programmes on the topic of menstruation or an idiomatic expression such as "Das versteht kein Schwein." etc. Such a programme can be shown in class with a beamer, and every learner can download it onto computer and MP3-player and then work with it individually according to his or her interests and requirements. The combination of independent learning and tutorial support by the teacher in the class context is of essential importance for successfully learning the language. Jones & Colin 1997 show that even highly qualified managers do not work successfully with programs that are geared towards their professional requirements if they have to work entirely on their own. The concept of blended learning, the incorporation of autonomous, self-determined learning phases into the structured group phases is essential so that the learners do not lose interest. This is also demonstrated by the learner Else in (B 2), who was interviewed by Stracke-Elbina 1998.

(B 2) Learner Else on working with the program Think and Talk French; English translation of the German contribution; Stracke-Elbina 1998: 77)

(87) Else: Because the other half of the course. . . Well, I could never do this computer stuff alone.

(88) Else: Well, I think, if there hadn’t been both, the class with real conver/ I mean with real people and, and answers and, I wouldn’t have been able to, well continue, any longer like that, I think.

This extract exemplifies the dichotomy of diversity and standardization referred to in this article's title: the technical standardization of document format, communication protocols and approaches to information make a literally 'limitless'
access to information possible. The opposite can be seen in the regional standards that the entertainment industry has insisted upon regarding DVDs. For commercial reasons, the use of a European DVD in the United States or Asia is made more difficult. Here international standardization was systematically avoided to the detriment of the consumer. Where technical standardization does exist, on the other hand, it makes an absolutely vast array of content accessible. Here standardization leads to diversity.

Even if we are regarding learners and language teaching in particular we can see similar polarized processes that are mutually dependent on each other. On the one hand we have standardized development stages of learner language, on the other hand we may see individual progress or even stagnation or progress reversal within the various stages. We have highly individual learner personalities with a wide range of different approaches to language learning, different learning techniques and a wide range of interests. In conventional, textbook-oriented language teaching all students are treated more or less the same, in a way this is a levelling of differences. This undesirable standardization can be countered with conventional or unconventional methods, though the so-called new media offer particular advantages.

(Lack of) Self-assessment of learning progress

Finally, I would like to mention one more highly important aspect of independent, partner-oriented learning. In conventional textbook-oriented teaching both instructors and learners can see the learning progress documented from chapter to chapter. The chapters with their varying grammatical emphasis give the learner the impression that he or she increasingly learns more and more about the language over the course of time and that therefore language competence increases. When considering L2 acquisition processes earlier we have already seen that this may be a deceptive impression, and we also know of complaints by teachers that learners cannot use those elements in spontaneous speech that they had apparently just mastered in the classroom. Nevertheless the learners believe that they are making progress. In contrast to this structured language teaching, the project-oriented approach lacks such a framework that imparts a sense of security to the students. Though they do have the opinion that they have dealt with interesting topics and have acquired additional knowledge, they miss the awareness of having learnt specific grammar rules. And to be fair they have indeed - strictly speaking - not learnt any grammar rules, even if they can use the foreign language in conformity to the rules. This insecurity can lead as far as a rejection of the open forms of language teaching. Of course, this would be extremely counter-productive. So how can this be avoided?

A first step must be to inform the learners that the language teaching process does aim at a systematic, even if subconscious acquisition of grammar rules. Unfortunately, this necessary procedure has proved not to be sufficient. We also have to make clear to the learners both that they are making progress and also how this progress is to be assessed.

This problem can be shown in an interdisciplinary research project on the evaluation of an English-language law programme on Anglo-American law. A law-related work placement in an English-speaking country is a compulsory requirement of this degree course, which is offered jointly by the Law Department and the Sprachenzentrum. When signing up for the course, the students already have
to demonstrate a high standard of English language skills. In a survey, the students complained about their lack of knowledge concerning legal terminology and therefore wished to have more preparation concerning legal terminology. On the other hand, their work placement or internship had mostly increased their speaking skills (41%), in fact more so than their legal knowledge, which increased by 29%, and their reading skills, which increased by 16%. Here we can see a displacement in the awareness of communication problems. A terminological gap is seen as a lack of legal knowledge. The interactive possibilities of closing this gap such as reformulating or, for example, modifying the question or answer is not seen as a form of language competence. On the whole, it seems to be that communication problems that are caused by language deficiencies are mainly seen as content deficiencies, as the lack of legal terminology and legal knowledge. In similar fashion, learners in autonomous language learning scenarios interpret a lack of knowledge about rules as a lack of language competence. This impression can and, indeed, must be counteracted in several ways. First of all, evaluation and reflection phases that both the WebQuest concept and the autonomous concept of Dam incorporate belong to the very core of language teaching. In these phases, the learners reflect on their activities and assess them with regard to the communicative scope of their language skills. Thus they achieve an awareness of the progress of their L2 acquisition process.

To supplement these reflections it is also possible to increase awareness of learning progress through tests. The initial level of language competence can be assessed through a test at the beginning of a course, and then the test can be carried out at specific intervals throughout the course. This method is used at the Sprachenzentrum in so-called tandem courses where two learners with different native languages each help their partner learn their own native language. We use the C-Test for German and English as our test instrument as it can be carried out quickly and is highly reliable. For absolute beginners, language progress can also be determined through self-assessment. For this purpose, ranges exist which determine what a learners can already successfully manage in the foreign language with regard to the four skills. ALTE 2003 provides such ranges, as does the more well-known Common European Framework of Languages 2001 published by the European Council. A further, highly efficient though somewhat more time-consuming method is to have the learner communicate with a native speaker trained in these issues. Then the native speaker can assess the learner's L2 knowledge.

A further dimension the instructor can use is to assess which language acquisition stage the learner has attained. This method of profile analysis is based on the language acquisition stages presented earlier. It enables a reliable assessment of language competence. The learner can see which stage he has already attained and which he still needs to achieve. This feedback is absolutely necessary in order that the learner receives confirmation of the progress he has made but which he can neither consciously register nor assess correctly.

As this article has shown, the computer itself does not form the centre of computer-assisted language teaching. It plays a functional role just as pencil and paper or chalk and talk do. I sincerely hope that I was able to point out some connections and useful pointers for the optimal realisation of this. One thing is certain: with the help of the new media we can overcome boundaries and enter fascinating new worlds.
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iTunes U (within iTunes); podcasts from universities
www.maerchenpodcas.de; weekly new and old fairy tales to listen to
www.podcast.de; extensive German podcast portal
www.podscope.com; search engine for podcast transcripts
www.wdr5.de/lilipuz/programmvorschau/programm.phtml (Lilipuz homepage of
the WDR) with links to podcasts

Programs
proVoc: vocabulary exercises which have been compiled on the computer can be
used on the iPod
Think and Talk German (1986 und 1991) Knoxville, TN: Hyperglot/Berlitz