

# Review of a German as a Second Language Textbook Used at a Japanese University

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*Schritte International Neu*, published by Hueber Verlag, is a three - level textbook series designed for German language learners aligned with the pedagogical goals outlined in the Common European Languages of Reference (CEFR) levels A1, A2 and B2. This global textbook series seeks to prepare learners to live and/or work in German speaking countries by acquainting them with everyday communication situations that they may encounter while spending time there. In my review, I examine the most basic level textbook in the series: *Schritte International Neu 1 - A1.1* authored by Daniela Niebisch, Sylvette Pennig-Hiemstra, Franz Specht, Monika Bovermann, Angela Pude and Monika Reimann. This textbook is a half-volume of the A1 level. In this review, I examine the textbook's pedagogical rationale, its content, its usage by Japanese university students who are learning German for the first time, and its strengths and weaknesses. I also describe the textbook's overall appropriateness for my students based on my perspective as a German language instructor.

## **Rationale**

The rationale behind using the *Schritte International Neu 1 - A1.1* (hereafter referred to as *SIN 1 - A1.1*) textbook is to provide students with the necessary language skills that will become useful to them should they travel or live in a German-speaking country and that will guide them toward CEFR's A1 as the pedagogical goal. A more specific target is to prepare learners to pass the German language test known as *Start Deutsch 1* (level A1).

## **Content Description**

*SIN - A1.1* is an A-4 sized textbook made up of the following components: regular course book, workbook, vocabulary section, grammar overview, and self-assessment tests. The accompanying audio CD can be used for specific dialogues and listening exercises found throughout the textbook. Each unit focuses on speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, and includes sections on vocabulary and grammar. German is used as the sole language in the textbook and it is this feature that differentiates it from most German as a Second Language textbooks published in Japan, which commonly use Japanese in the instructions, grammar explanations and vocabulary definitions.

There is a separate instructor's handbook which contains extensive explanations, suggestions, exercise answers, tips and supplements but is not part of this review.

The textbook which is composed of 93 pages makes extensive use of colorful illustrations and actual photos. There are seven units in the textbook, each of them developed around a unifying theme as follows:

- Unit 1: *Guten Tag, Mein Name ist...* (Hello, my name is...)
- Unit 2: *Meine Familie* (My Family)
- Unit 3: *Essen und Trinken* (Food and Drinks)
- Unit 4 *Meine Wohnung* (My Apartment)
- Unit 5: *Mein Tag* (My Day)
- Unit 6: *Freizeit* (Free Time)
- Unit 7: *Lernen - ein Leben lang* (Learning - a Life Long)

Each unit is further divided into additional one-page modules titled A, B, C, D and E. Learners are introduced to new language points in module A through C and then provided with authentic language situations in modules D and E. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all the language points contained in the textbook, but it is possible to gain an understanding of the type of points covered by reviewing the first unit. In unit 1, module A (*Guten Tag*) deals with greetings and departures, module B (*Ich heie Laura Novak*) covers interrogatives about one's name and introducing oneself and others, while module C (*Ich komme aus Polen*) has learners ask about countries and also express their knowledge of language. Module D (*Buchstaben*) introduces the alphabet and focuses on asking how to ask for someone in a phone conversation while module E (*Adresse*) has learners read business cards and fill out forms.

Each unit begins with a general introduction to the unit's theme with the presentation of eight, colorful photos of people and settings across two pages. Learners listen to short dialogues on the accompanying CD and then either answer questions or complete brief exercises. At the end of each unit are short grammar pages with several grammatical points previously introduced in the exercises of the same unit. One noteworthy observation about this grammar page is that there are no written explanations of grammar rules but instead lists of examples or charts. It falls to the learner to deduce the grammar rules or for the instructor to explain them to students.

At the end of every unit is a double-sided page with short activities and projects. This part of the textbook can be used as a unit revision or used in part with the rest of the unit.

The media package contains CDs with listening texts to the textbook and one DVD with film clips that are related to the content of the units.

### **Class Description**

My university does not have a German language department but like most universities in Japan, students at my university are given the opportunity to take non-English foreign language courses from an offering of French, Chinese and Korean languages, as well as German, with the duration no longer than four semesters. English Department students at my university are required to take two semesters of a non-English foreign language, but that is not the case with students from the other departments. It is not surprising then that English Department students are heavily represented in my classes.

In my many talks with my students they admitted they have no overriding pedagogical reason for studying German. Some of them are attracted to my German courses because I am a native-speaker of German, while others want to learn the language because they have watched German movies or are fans of “die Mannschaft” – the national German football team. Some of them would like to travel or live in a German-speaking country although they do not have any plans to do so in the near future. That said, there has been a heightened awareness of German language studies at my university since it started sending students on a short-term study program to a university in Germany.

### **Textbook Usage**

I use *SIN - A1.1* in introductory German classes over two semesters. Lessons take place once a week for 90 minutes for a total of 15 sessions per semester. I cover *SIN - A1.1*'s first three units in the first semester and the final four units in the second semester. In the first semester, I hold off using the textbook until the third lesson. In the interim, I acquaint learners with the German sound system, pronouns, basic sentence structure, vocabulary used in the textbook's instructions and point out German words that are close in spelling and/or sound with English and Japanese. Because this is their first exposure to the German language, I prefer not to use the textbook right away. Also, some students tend to add the course after one or two lessons

and so they have ample time to catch up with their classmates. This marks the second year in which I have used *SIN - A1.1*, but I have used the previous edition titled *Schritte International 1 – A1.1* in preceding years. I also instruct two higher-level German courses for which I use *Schritte International Neu - A1.2*.

The language of instruction in my class varies depending on the type of course in which students are enrolled. In one course, I estimate that 90 percent of the course instruction is in German while the rest of the instruction is in English and/or Japanese. The other course is designated to be instructed entirely in German, so I make a concerted effort to adhere to this language policy. It should be noted, however, that both courses are introductory courses open to students who share the same basic proficiency level and use *SIN - A1.1* as the assigned textbook.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

In this part of the paper, I address *SIN - A1.1*'s strengths and weaknesses in the following areas:

#### Visual Design

*SIN - A1.1*'s visual design is appealing in most facets of its presentation. The brightly colored cover depicts two casually dressed young people, a man and a woman, about the age of my students on their way, it would seem, to university. The friendly demeanor they show imparts warmth and openness and clearly denotes that the target learners are young people.

The table of contents is laid out in a two-page, multi-colored format that contains a description of each unit superimposed over a background of a different color designated for each unit. This attention to color is evidenced throughout the textbook by the use of colored tabs in the same designated unit color on the top-left side of the page that serves as an excellent guiding device to reference particular units.

Even a quick scan of the textbook reveals a very attractive layout. There are colorful photos and illustrations on every page, which effectively communicate the language point contained in the accompanying text. I found the photos and illustrations to be an excellent introduction to the language points on each page and used them to facilitate a deeper understanding among my students when introducing new language points.

The publisher did not limit visuals to only pictures and illustrations. The varying styles of typography used throughout the textbook also increases the book's ease of readability, which is accomplished through the mixing of letter sizes, use of decorative letters and coloring. This is particularly notable in the right, side-bar sections located on the grammar pages with the result that they make grammar look simple and fun to learn.

Another visual feature found in *SIN - A1.1* is its lack of textual density. There are just enough white spaces arranged between exercises and tasks to make the text appear more legible even though the content is quite rich. When used in combination with the different colors, the text space makes it easier to find the tasks and exercises in the textbook.

#### Organization, Structure and Flow

The underlying philosophy of *SIN I - A1.1* is that language is best learned when it is used for meaningful communication according to CEFR's A1 description and can-do objectives. The various speaking, listening, reading and writing tasks and exercises consistently reflect this philosophy throughout the textbook in terms of their authenticity.

In particular, *SIN I - A1.1* is comprehensively structured in the way the new grammar points are used throughout the various dialogues, listening and writing tasks and workbook exercises. The approach to grammar is inductive with simple examples of grammar usage but no explanations.

I do not view the lack of grammar explanations in the textbook as a weakness in teaching whole classes since the pedagogical focus is on communication rather than accuracy and form. Instructors should be able to provide additional grammar instruction if needed and can look to *SIN - A1.1's* accompanying instructor's manual for guidance. On the other hand, the lack of grammar explanations may make *SIN I - A1.1* less suitable for those learners who wish to use the textbook for self-study.

The content in the workbook matches well with that in the textbook. I suggest instructors use the textbook and parts of the workbook in class at the same time when covering the same language points but leave some of the workbook exercises for homework as well. After practicing the language points in the textbook's tasks and exercises, students can then focus on producing output based on what they have covered in the textbook. However, I do find getting to specific exercises in the workbook to be troublesome at times because the page

numbers do not follow the page numbers in the textbook but instead start anew. On several occasions, my students have mistakenly gone to pages in the textbook when I wanted them to go to the workbook. Also, the colored tabs used in the textbook to separate units are not used in the workbook section. It would have been beneficial to use the same tabs for easy reference.

The vocabulary section is a very impressive, structural part of the textbook. Located at the end of the textbook, it includes an average of 70~90 words per unit for a total of 558 words all related to the seven unit topics. The unique feature about this section is that there are no corresponding definitions to the words. Students can look up the definitions and write them on the line next to each respective word. In the case of my students, I instructed them to write the definitions in either English or Japanese. The listed vocabulary flows throughout the tasks, exercises, audio dialogues and workbook and therefore should be given as much attention as possible.

In my classes, I experienced that my students needed my assistance with pronouncing and explaining the new words presented in the vocabulary section. As a warm up in every lesson, I pronounce one page of words and have noted that several students usually record my utterances each time. There seems to be a need to provide an audio recording of these words so students can practice their pronunciation. In regard to the word definitions, my students sometimes required my help in explaining certain words beyond what they found in their language dictionaries.

The media packet is an essential extension of the textbook. The CDs highlight voice recordings that are clear and natural. The DVDs show film clips of the same characters that appear in the textbook. The film clips are professionally done and also use clear, natural dialogues. One criticism of these film clips, however, is that they do not seem to have subtitles or captions. My students found them difficult to follow at times and it would have made my task easier if it had included subtitles.

### Clarity One

*SIN - A1.1* shows a high degree of clarity and consistency in all of its parts. I found no strange surprises nor awkward uses of language. It is commendable that the authors chose to use authentic German instructions for the tasks and exercises. In fact, these instructions became part of my students' German standard vocabulary. In order to better facilitate the acquisition of the instructional vocabulary found in the textbook, I explain their usage on the first day of class and provide them with a list of the textbook's instructions, which they paste on the inside first page of their textbook for easy reference.

### **Appropriateness**

Based on my experiences using *SIN - A1.1* in the classroom, I find it to be a very appropriate textbook to introduce German to Japanese university students. Although it is a beginner's level textbook, the authors have managed to include substantial authentic materials to expose German to students that is used in the real world. My students may not be very experienced second language learners, but they can recognize authenticity when they see it and *SIN - A1.1* more than provides them with that.

With its correlation to the CEFR, *SIN - A1.1* also brings an automatic German language curriculum to Japanese institutions such as mine, which do not have whole German language departments, but instead rely on individual instructors, who select and determine the educational standards that are reflected in stand-alone textbooks. I do not suggest that some instructors or such textbooks are not up to the task, but why not use a proven, global textbook like *SIN - A1.1* with its comprehensive wealth of tasks, exercises, activities and videos at hand to give our students the foreign language education they deserve. *SIN - A1.1* is not perfect for Japanese learners but its strengths far outweigh its weaknesses and make it a very capable textbook in German language classes.

### **References**

Niebisch, D., S. Penning-Hiemstra, F. Specht, M. Bovermann, A. Pude, M. Reimann (2016). *Schritte International Neu A1.1*. Ismaning: Hueber Verlag.