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## Seminar text of German in blended learning

Sarka Hubackova <sup>a\*</sup><sup>a</sup>University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, 500 03 Hradec Králové, Czech Republic

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### Abstract

The paper starts with the characteristics of selected coherent text and it introduces some criteria of such a selection. The focus of the article is in the description of methods used in seminar lesson teaching and in listing of topics suitable for the teaching mentioned. Attention is given to applying of word formation as a help with increasing students' vocabulary of German. As for reading methods, the author refers to her article on that issue published recently.

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### 1. Seminar text of German in blended learning

A text as we understand this term in this article, has its range about 250 written words, is coherent and has its own topic. Except for such texts we use so called "hörtexte" in our seminar German lesson, which are printed recordings used for practicing of listening skill. But the usage of those reprinted recordings is not within the scope of this paper.

The text we use are printed in the sheet form. They represent literal or a little adapted passages of longer texts, books, short stories, newspaper articles, exceptionally letters. Some of them are professional texts from the field of sports, tourism, economics, finances and electronics.

Each seminar group at the Faculty of Informatics and Management has its own specific set of texts. That depends on the professional field the seminar group is devoted to. The teaching usage of texts covers the study of composition, syntax, vocabulary, sentence stress, reading and contents analysis. One single text usage never covers more than two seminars in the schedule of a curriculum, but several points of subject matter are taught at every seminar lesson.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +420493332302

E-mail address: [sarka.hubackova@uhk.cz](mailto:sarka.hubackova@uhk.cz)

We use the texts in blended learning. The applying of them is almost always accompanied by listening of a recording spoken by a native speaker or supplemented by students' study of a short eLearning program. That is well and free available and it is given as an optional homework to students.

Using the text we follow four teaching principles: a balance, a change, a well-trying method, interaction based on collaboration. Because proficiency in German implies the ability to compose and express as well as to understand, every seminar lesson contains some elements of both reading and listening as well as some points of grammar, syntax and composing in written and spoken language. We always try to maintain the balance by the students, newly learnt information and its practicing as well as practical usage.

Our choice of texts is affected by possible motivation. Our effort is to have students interested in the contents of texts. Those should be motivating for everyone and should provide their own motivation given by interesting contents.

We change the difficulty of texts. That is why we usually use adapted texts. Our adaptation rests mostly upon vocabulary. We leave out very rare single words completely or we replace them by more common synonyms. We divide compound and very long sentences into two or more units. We leave out two descriptive stretches of sentences that do not carry any important contents and may therefore be seen as relatively boring by students.

For the sake of change we incorporate texts of different topics from one to another. There is a text even with language teaching or grammar point in one seminar in every term. We not only change the text characteristics and difficulty, we also change procedures of work with a text during every seminar lesson, we change the organization of lessons and pace during every separate lesson.

Our own well-trying methodical principle is to begin every separate point of the lesson with active students who volunteer. Such a progress is very flexible, it brings a great saving of time in most cases and first of all it is very motivating for other students. Sometimes even quite a wide range of seminar work may only rest upon volunteers' activity.

At the beginning of the first term we continue on the access to a text students are accustomed to since the time spent at their secondary schools. Therefore we distribute the sheets with one single text to students several days before the seminar under consideration and we invite them to sign their full names to the sheet and to get really familiar with the text in the way they had been used to at the secondary school. We do not ask any specific familiarization with the text this time. We explicitly allow to students to write down any notes into the printed text.

Our experience makes me collect the lesson, check students' signatures and get familiar with student's notes written between the lines of every student's sheet. The findings may be quite surprising. There are no notes in some cases. That may show up a bright student who does not need any supportive notes, or a lazy student who missed any home preparation, or a student who wrote down his notes into his copybook, because he does not want to write anything into the sheet. However, there usually are some notes. Most often isolated words as mother tongue equivalents looked up in a dictionary, sometimes the translations of several language structures, sometimes even stretches of language longer than a sentence. A note concerning a grammar point is very scarce. I always pay attention to students' notes on the text and I put down some extreme cases with related names.

No work with vocabulary or with a translation of the text will represent the teaching effort of this seminary. My task will be to ask comprehensive questions checking the understanding of contents and aim of the text. At this stage of work the students are allowed to use words or phrases of the text in their answers. We progress quite differently before some next seminars.

Interactive as well as collaborative learning is conditional on the teacher's presence in the classroom. Whenever the students work on their own at individual tasks, they usually are required to work as they are asked to. They are allowed to do more independently when they collaborate in pairs or in small groups. There is more interaction when they work as a full class with the teacher.

If the students had the text at their disposal during their home preparation, we do not incorporate any work on vocabulary. We concentrate on reading the text out without any mistakes and on dividing every sentence into

discourse colons and practicing sentence stress and intonation. We further incorporate the explanation of some grammar structures and noun groups. A selection of verbs follows and their grouping into regular and so called strong verbs. Students are asked to give all irregular forms of those verbs. Each text contains some verbs with prefixes, students classify those units according of short sentences with the verbs under discussion. We prepared some examples of them as a component of our home preparation. That makes possible to change the pace of the lesson.

The work with verbs often initiates syntactical analysis of some sentences and the forthcoming making of new sentences similar to those occurring in the text. We concentrate on the subordinate clauses and their typical word order in German. We practice the possibly different order of subordinate and main clause in some kinds of sentences in concentration with used conjunctions. The shortening of sentences or clauses may follow showing how well students grasp the gist of a main or subordinate clause respectively, and especially the function of it.

Sometimes but not very often we include the dictation of a shorter context with forthcoming analysis of spelling mistakes. We announce such a task in advance. That makes students pay more attention to the written form of some words. To change such a task we sometimes dictate only several, not too many, isolated words not connected with the text treated, but representing, according to our experience, the source of frequent spelling mistakes and known to cause difficulties for most students.

Less time is spent on explaining grammar of the points listed here. We can refer to the course-book used by students at secondary school and spend more time on practicing the items.

Of importance is practicing the correct pronunciation, especially the one of polysyllable German compounds.

We close the work on a text with its reproduction. We invite students to formulate it repeatedly but in a shorter extent every time.

We try to lead students up to the view that they might be able to participate in the contents of seminar lessons in a way. We therefore set as a homework for next scheduled meeting to work out their suggestions of needs concerning conversation, listening, grammar explanations, dictations, characteristics of text, their length, reading, work on vocabulary, practicing pronunciation etc. We want to lead students to get the sense of responsibility for their study. They therefore may volunteer but they are not allowed to be anonymous. We require their suggestions to be elaborated in German as well. We give our standpoint to their suggestions in the next seminar lessons and we try to meet anything reasonable of their demands during the very same lesson.

We of course do not deal with all the listed grammar points in one seminary lesson. We do not incorporate all the activities or exercises either. We must follow the curriculum, but we try to vary the organization of seminar lessons.

There is an alternative to the seminar teaching progress I have just described. That is in the case when we distribute the text sheets to students not until at the beginning of the seminar lesson. Then the first thing they are to do is to get familiar with the text through silent reading. Doing that they are allowed to write down their notes into the text or into their notebooks. Every student's progress may be quite individual. I monitor their pace. I do not try to regulate it in a way but on the other side I do not wait until the last one or two of them will finish their reading. I test the students' general comprehension by asking several questions. Almost always there are some students who do not understand the text to some extent. There are usually some new words or expressions that prevent from the understanding.

I have to mention two things now. First, I start with a relatively easy text and I do not suppose many new words to be unknown to students. I expect such a situation and I always have with me a good dictionary if I know I will work on vocabulary in the class.

There are two perspectives of my proceeding. One is isolated, the other is very often. I will speak about both of them.

The isolated case concerns the lesson in which I work on vocabulary with students' seminar group for the first time. I want to continue on their attitude to new words of a text that they have brought from secondary school. I know that they are used to look up every unknown word of a text in a dictionary. And so we now do it

almost in the same way. The difference is that I do not allow to look up every word in the dictionary but I invite students to try infer the meaning of a word from its context. I write students' inferences on the board and they copy them down in their exercise books. All inferences introduced, I ask students to use my dictionary and see how accurate their inferences were. They write the most accurate ones down in their sheets or copybooks. We do it gradually with every new word in the same way. Students are free in deciding which words they will learn by heart.

In other cases, we do not repeat this procedure in order to have a full picture of it that students should remember. We leave out the new words they are able to guess in their meaning from the context. We use dictionary if only they are convinced that any inference is not possible.

A serious point of attention are the compounds of German. Most of them are composed from two roots, very frequent ones have three roots, often are compounds of even four roots. Speaking from my experience, I have to say that a trouble with them is not so much in understanding them as in using them. It is very difficult for a learner to decide when to use an appropriate adjective with the noun in question and when to put the compound. Let us mention that a structure with a noun in attributive position and function is not possible in German.

Almost every text brings the opportunity of showing at least one of ways of how to extend vocabulary. The way runs towards and through word formation. Let us teach students to get familiar to the dictionary meaning of different derivational affixes. The prefixes are most important for verbs, suffixes for nouns, adjectives and adverbs; both prefixes and suffixes may be significant for some groups of nouns. The subject matter about derivatives is quite suitable for a group work in the format of homework. Let us give two illustrative examples at least. First the simpler one: The text brings the noun *Vorschlag* ("suggestion"). We invite one or two students to find out the words with prefix *vor-* which are treated in their dictionaries. The task itself may be divided into two more specific smaller tasks:

Students may find out how many the words are and select about 10 or 12 of them which may be seen as most useful to learn.

They may define the meaning of the prefix in all separate items and denote if with all cases it is the same or if it is different.

If the second variant is true, students should identify the meanings of the prefixes and count out which of the meanings obtained is the most frequent and how it is in the case of the selected words. However, don't let student search why it is so; it is a matter of historical grammar. But other couples of students may be invited to do the same task for the prefixes *bei-*, *an-*, *auf-*, *mit-*, *ver-*, *un-*, *zu-*.

The second example is more complicated. Let us have the noun *Freiheit* ("freedom"). Every student knows that this word is derived from the root word *frei* using the suffix *-heit*. We may invite every single student to "read" a section of a dictionary and find out other nouns derived in the same way or groups of nouns derived by means of suffixes like *-keit*, *-schaft*, *-ion*, *-in*. In this way we can divide the whole dictionary among the seminar groups of students and gain very interesting information. We can ask students to define the characteristics of separate noun groups and find out what all of them have in common. In both cases, the results will represent quite a suitable topics of further coming discussion.

Even if we do not incorporate the exercises described here into our lessons, we should mention at least such points of word formation that may give help with students' increasing of vocabulary.

Among further aspects of teaching a foreign language, the reading of a coherent text plays its substantial role. However, I have devoted to the issue of reading at classroom a separate article (Hubackova, 2011) and I dare to refer to it.

Additionally, I know how important are the compounds especially in modern scientific German and therefore I want to give my attention to those issues and prepare a separate article on teaching compounds as a means of increasing students' vocabulary at higher education eLearning seminar lessons.

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