

Continuity beyond graduation – an online course for advanced learners of German as a Foreign Language

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INTRODUCTION

German as a Foreign Language was re-introduced at the University of Kelaniya in 1994 as a main subject for the Bachelor Degree of three years duration after a lapse of ten years. The four year Honours Degree Programme in German Studies was first introduced in 2001. Since the re-introduction the number of students offering German as a main subject has rapidly increased with over 70 students graduating every year. Apart from the Degree Programmes, a two year certificate course in German is offered to students of any faculty of the university. Thus, the total number of students following German as a subject is around 450 at present. Consequently, around 1400 graduates with competency in German have ventured into the professional world over the last 22 years. According to the previous studies conducted, the graduates are employed in a wide spectrum of fields including the Foreign Service, teaching profession, government and banking sector, tourism and hospitality industry and multinational companies, while some leave the shores for postgraduate studies or for migration purposes. Thanks to the networking through social media, many contacts can be established online today and students from the first batch to the latest keep in touch with each other as well as with the academic staff. One of the concerns of many a graduate was that they have completely detached themselves from the learning environment and the German language that they learnt with much zest during their student days. While some graduates require the language competency for their current professions, others express their need to keep in touch with the language out of interest. Also, the graduates employed as teachers need an opportunity to build up on the language skills they currently possess.

PURPOSE

All teachers of foreign languages are only too familiar with their students coming to lessons following a brief semester vacation with 'blank sheets' in their memory, forgetting what they have learnt during the previous semester. It is not an understatement that skills acquired in a foreign language with a vast geographical distance to the native speakers is easily forgotten when not in constant use by the learner. Therefore, the challenges faced by graduates to retain their language skills after leaving the university cannot be undermined. At present there is no postgraduate diploma in Advanced German or a similar course offered by the Department of Modern Languages for the benefit of the graduates. This study thus focuses on steps taken recently to provide reinforcement to graduates of German to improve their hitherto gained language competencies and exposure to the German speaking community.

BACKGROUND

Several studies have been conducted since 2004 at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya in integrating new advancements in technology for improving language skills and cultural awareness of students of German as a Foreign Language. These include studies on integrating Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), blended learning and web-based learning. Furthermore, an online course with E-modules was developed in 2005 at the request of several graduates of German at the time. The participants were advanced learners above B2 in need of a support course to improve their language skills. Since the successful completion of these modules, no follow up course was developed due to the main focus shifting towards rapidly growing number of undergraduates offering German for Bachelor and Honours Degree Programmes. Improvement of their language competency was seen as a priority. In comparison to the first support E-course for advanced learners

conducted two decades ago, today the technology has improved beyond one's imagination.

APPROACH

Following success in enhancing language competency of students and their intercultural awareness during studies on integrating ICT in the German as a Foreign Language classroom since 2004, a common learning platform was developed at the commencement of the current academic year for undergraduates of all levels at University of Kelaniya offering German as a main subject. Due to the user friendly nature and the variety of applications to design course content, monitor student progress and upload student assignments, an already existing open platform for online learning, namely www.openlearning.com, was selected for the course. The learning platform comprises 25 modules of authentic material with online exercises and activities for each semester of all Bachelor Degree and the Honours Degree Programmes amounting to 6 courses. Furthermore, a course for advanced learners (Deutsch für Fortgeschrittene) was developed for the benefit of the academic staff and graduates who studied German at the university previously. Apart from the authentic audio visual material, update of current affairs, access to online exercises and interactive activities, training material for international examinations i.e. B1, B2, C1, C2 of Goethe Institute, Germany, is also available on this platform.

RESULTS

The facility provided through the portal for graduates who offered German as a main subject for the Bachelor Degree has been online for over one semester. It has been observed that the online portal is more frequently used by the recent graduates than their counterparts who graduated a decade or two ago. However, the currently enrolled participants range from the batch of 2000 to the most recent batch of 2015 graduates. The school teachers and the academic staff of the Department of Modern Languages have shown a

keen interest in completing the modules and following the current affairs on the blog posts regularly. Around 10% has been successful at international examinations i.e. B2 at Goethe Institute, won scholarships or secured placement at German universities for postgraduate studies. All the participants agree that the online portal helps them to recall what was learnt during their undergraduate days and further improve their knowledge. Access to all levels of courses ranging from A1 to C2 on the portal has been cited as one of the most important aspects of this facility provided to them. Easy access to selected and appropriate material through a mouse click, insight into daily lifestyle of German speaking countries, interaction with peers, teachers through the blog and forum has been cited as other positive aspects of this facility provided to them.

CONCLUSION

The online course available through the common learning platform for graduates of German as a Foreign Language has proven to be beneficial to those who wish to keep in touch with the language from wherever they reside at present. The facility providing access to online courses of different competency levels is seen by the participants as an answer to their fears of losing the existing language skills. Learning is a lifelong process. As future perspectives, it is expected to enroll more graduates for the courses through the existing network and introduce face-to-face sessions at the end of each semester. Furthermore, it is envisaged that other foreign languages offered by the Department of Modern Languages also develop similar online support courses for their former students, thus providing a platform to continue improving their language competency beyond their graduation.

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KEYWORDS

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