**Web Design Evaluation**

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*German Language Course*

*British Broadcasting Corporation*

*www.bbc.co.uk/languages/german*

**Overview and Summary**

German Language is one of the many online-based courses offered by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Learning for free. The web site is located at the URL address written above and contains four major parts: German Steps, For Beginners, Quick Fix and Learning Games. Additional features include an assessment that gauges the learner’s level, help in finding German classes, weather in Germany, schedule of German language programs on BBC television, newsletter, grammar tips, resources for teachers and tutors, stories and photos of students and links to related web sites. Below is a description of the four major sections.

German Steps

This is a beginner's course organized into six topics: Meeting People, Getting around Berlin, Food and Drink, Taking a Holiday, Making Arrangements, Shops and Services. Each topic consists of 4 units and a challenge. Each unit presents scenes from daily life using pictures and audio, guides to relevant vocabulary, grammar and culture, and four practice activities (guess the words, re-arrange the dialogue, build sentences and speak and write). Moreover, a complete list of German words with English equivalent, syllabus, index of language points and cultural fact files, learning log, suggestions for further studies and twelve weekly email tips and encouragement are provided.

For Beginners

This comprises a dynamic introduction to the German language using ten short videos of basic conversations (i.e., saying where you live, talking about what you do, buying train tickets). Another feature of this section is a 20-part television series about a man from Romania who relocates to Germany and learns how to effectively communicate using the German language. Students may either watch or listen to the ten introductory clips or the television show while looking at the transcripts with English translations. A link to the German Steps course is also available in this section.

Quick Fix

This part provides a list of essential phrases in German that can be printed out and corresponding audio files that can be downloaded to an mp3 player or mobile phone. These phrases are helpful in basic conversations as well as dialogues regarding accommodation, food and drink, shopping, getting around and skiing. This section also provides links to essential phrases in other languages such as French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Albanian, Chinese, Greek, etc.

Learning Games

This segment contains challenges that test the learner’s knowledge of the German language. Players can pick up interesting facts about German Headlines, the World Cup, German Beer and Oktoberfest. One of the games provides a link to “Cool German”, a web page that enumerates German colloquial terms. These expressions are divided into different subjects (i.e., arguments, interjections, politics, health, music, football). Similar to the phrases in the previous section, the jargons have print and mp3 versions available for download.

**Sponsors**

BBC Learning is an educational web site sponsored by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The BBC logo is very apparent on top of the German Language course web pages and several links about the company’s information are located at the bottom of the screen.

**Main Goal and Target Audience**

BBC Learning aims to provide help and support to anyone who is thinking about or returning to the world of adult learning. Although this purpose and target audience is not indicated in the German Language course web site, it is clearly stated in the “About Learning” section of the BBC Learning home page. The course includes content for all levels; from a complete beginner, to quite fluent or somewhere in between the two.

**Web Design**

Words and Graphics

The texts in the web site are clear and readable. Headers can be easily distinguished from the body text since it is in bold format. In vocabulary lists and translations, it is easy to differentiate the German words from English because of the variation in colors.

According to Clark & Mayer’s multimedia principle, using words and graphics are beneficial for novice learners. This online course engages beginner students in active learning by presenting both. The graphics are few and some pages do not have pictures. Most images are decorative (i.e., snapshot of an indoor mall in a lesson about essential shopping phrases in German, photo of a waitress next to the description of the beginner’s course, screenshot of a weather report along with the caption “In the summer, it can get quite hot all over Germany with occasional showers”). Some graphics promote learning (i.e., videos on how to order a main course, how to ask for directions or how to buy train tickets).

Clark & Mayer’s principle of contiguity is also evident all throughout the website. Majority of the words and its corresponding graphics are placed near each other on the screen. In the unit summary of German Steps for example, the German words and English equivalent are well-aligned with the picture that represents a particular scene. However, there is a violation of the contiguity principle in the assessment quiz. The correct answer and feedback is separate from the question and requires the learner to page back and forth which adds cognitive load to learning.

Words and Audio

The course contains plenty of audio files that are high in quality and is an excellent example of web design that applies Clark & Mayer’s coherence, modality and redundancy principles.

*Avoid e-lessons with extraneous audio*

There are no irrelevant background music and sounds in the site, only audio clips that assists learners in their mastery of the German language.

*Present words as audio narration, rather than on-screen text*

Each unit in German Steps begins with a story that uses pictures and audio only.

*Consider adding on-screen text to narration in special situations*

For learners who are not native speakers, spoken words alone might be difficult to process. The unit summary of German Steps overcomes this challenge by presenting text that is supported by both graphics and audio. Another special situation that will benefit from the redundancy principle is when the verbal material is long and complex or contains unfamiliar keywords. This is the case of the German videos and television show modules under the section “For Beginners”. However, the provision of transcript for each clip improves the presentation of the course. Students can read the text while watching the video or listening to the audio. All clips provide learners with the following options: watch, listen, read or all of the above.

Writing Style, On-screen Coach and Visible Author

Clark & Mayer recommend a conversational rather than formal approach to printed or spoken text in e-learning. The German language course delivers text and audio using both styles. Some sentences convey a user-friendly tone as a result of second-person narrative mode (e.g., “You offer to buy the first round. But how do you order two pints of lager?”). Other statements use the third-person narrative mode and appear quite impersonal (e.g., “These 10 online topics are based on the 20-part TV series and build on the absolute basics of Talk German”). Below are additional examples of the formal and conversational language used in the web site.

*Formal Style*

German Steps is an introduction to German language and culture, designed for use in social and work contexts. The syllabus incorporates key elements of Level One of the UK's National Language Standards and conforms to the first level of the European Language Framework. Although it's a stand-alone course, the content can be integrated into, or used to supplement, existing adult language provision.

*Conversational Style*

Hi, I’m Pille, your guide to the football challenge. My friends nicknamed me Pille which is a fan’s term for football.

You’ve got tickets for a big international match in Berlin’s Olympiastadion. You are tryingto find the entrance but there are so many signs ending in –eingang. Which one is right?

Although the site does not employ a visible author, an on-screen character named Pille guides the learners through a challenge quiz. Pille is neither helpful nor distracting because his only function is showing complementary expressions when questions or feedbacks are displayed.

Content

Another asset of this online course is the application of Clark & Mayer’s segmenting principle. The German language web site simplifies complex content by breaking it into smaller chunks. For example, the beginner’s course is divided into six different topics. Each topic consist five units that are also broken down into a short story, four activities and set of notes. Furthermore, each story is made simpler by splitting it into five different frames complete with audio, text and graphics features. Below is a specific example.

*German Steps Course*

Online Course for Beginners

*Major Topic*

Food and Drink

*Unit 3*

Ordering a meal

*Short Story*

Romantic dinner in a nice restaurant

*Frame 1*

Picture of a man asking for the menu with corresponding text and audio stating “Die Speisekarte, bitte” as well as the English translation (the menu, please) printed below the German phrase

**Critical Thinking**

For whatever information the website itself is limited to providing, BBC has posted related links and a search engine in its homepage for assistance that leads to external sites where a user may seek additional information. The site does provide a deeper understanding for things about Germany, like its culture. One example of this is through its Oktoberfest quiz, where it tests people about their knowledge of this annual German festival. This shows the use of deeper understanding because it goes beyond teaching the language rules that are expected from the site. This one activity in particular lets a user know right away if he or she is right or wrong, and provides an explanation for the correct answer. This allows users to reflect on their answers and classify the information gathered correctly.

**Exercises**

The course in German for beginners is comprised of six “German Steps,” which are lessons that broken up into categories that make up daily and common life (i.e., shopping and sightseeing). Each of these six sections has a concluding assessment that is called “The Challenge.” These challenges are exercises where students review and get scored based on what that specific lesson taught. These challenges incorporate a mixture of media through reading passages, listening to audio recordings of conversations, and providing scroll-down menus for answering questions. We feel that there are many items available that would appeal to virtually any kind of learner.

Although the site isn’t rich in collaborative learning, it does allow for communication amongst users. One example is the common site for all of the languages (i.e. Spanish and Chinese). People who have used the program can share their success stories with others through the “Your moving stories” section and read diaries of those traveling to other countries as approved by the BBC website. Although this doesn’t make for any significant one-to-one interaction, it does in fact humanize the lessons so that learners can relate to the site as a whole.

**Motivation**

Michael Allen states that “The more motivated to learn one is, the stronger the focus and the greater the readiness to do what’s necessary to accomplish the task.” Because this site is provided as a free public service, users would initially have to run into the site with a want for acquiring a new language, which is an outside motivator. The site is very beginner-friendly, as it clearly marks tabs geared for those just starting to speak German. One of the biggest motivating factors the site provides is a program it runs called “Steps in 12 Weeks.” Through this, its subscribers receive weekly emails that include encouraging messages and tips that relate to learning German. This newsletter, like many components of the BBC site, is free, and even includes an assessment at the end of the 12 weeks so that students can have concrete evidence of their growth. Another component that adds motivation is the user-friendliness of the site. Everything is categorized neatly throughout its interface, not making it a challenge for users to find the content they may be specifically looking for.

**Organization**

If one is new to the site, it is not hard to locate where one should begin navigating it. For example the tab marked as “For Beginners” is not difficult to spot since it is one of the top tabs on the site’s front-page. Many of the menus on the site are expandable, and therefore the site is not bombarded with too much information. The learner gets to control what information he or she wishes to be exposed to. Do the learners want to see the weather in Berlin? Do they want to access external links? Or do they simply want to go straight into the lessons? It is completely up to them. This non-intimidating presentation doesn’t make learners feel like there is just way too much content to cover, and makes the site as something that caters to the learner’s interests. Michael Allen would state that this site does well as it minimizes memory burden and promotes features as stated in his learner-interface design responsibilities. The section marked “German Steps” follows a logical flow of ideas when it comes to constructing lessons as it builds its lesson on previous knowledge, the bottom-up approach. For example, lessons in the “Meeting People” step go from “Introducing yourself” to “Where you come from,” which as educators we felt was a prime example of how to go from simple to complex, which is logical in education.

**Interactivity**

Since the site itself has an aesthetic feel that implies an adult audience, there are a lot of sophisticated elements to it that one wouldn’t find in a site aimed at a K-12 audience. Game-like activities that are present in the site include assessments that reflect one’s knowledge of the German language and culture. As mentioned earlier, the Oktoberfest quiz provides an interactive assessment through its multiple choice options and immediate feedback. Feedback, as Michael Allen states, allows learners to transfer skills because it personally points out a learner’s performance, which also fuels motivation. However, because this is an adult-oriented course, one does not see a lot of the flashy elements like those found in programs aimed at children (i.e., assistive characters and sound effects).

**Simulation**

This site is rich in simulations through a section of the site titled “Talk German.” Through this part of the site, a learner can select and view videos that bring up scenarios for the use of the German language as covered in the site’s lessons. These videos demonstrate uses for the language such as greetings, ordering food, and asking for directions. From this, we concluded that the scenarios presented are very practical as they are common situations in any setting. This was another great medium for learning that the site included.

**Comparison to Similar Sites**

Other German language courses found online did not really compare to what this site has to offer. For example, German for Travellers ([www.germanfortravellers.com](http://www.germanfortravellers.com)) only offered mp3 audios as part of its course without the use of assessments or any other learning modality. For something that chargers $19.95, one would expect to gain more than what a free site has to offer, but it fell short of our expectations. Then there was 101 Languages’ German program ([www.101languages.net/german](http://www.101languages.net/german)), which offers a free site that teaches its users the language. However, like the previous site this one was also disappointing. There is no interaction through its over-simplistic interface and there is no array in modes of learning other than reading text. The site itself appeared to be lifeless and easily forgettable. When comparing BBC’s German Language site to these others, much praise goes to the BBC through its wise mixture of content and appeal.

**Final Thoughts**

After analyzing the content, interface, interactivity, design, and goals of the site, our group has concluded that the BBC has definitely provided a valuable service to its learners. Although the site does have more an adult appeal, which excludes young children, the content it provides is clear and the site makes it fun to learn German. Because the BBC is a large website all on its own, it’s nice to find these treasures within a network that has a reputable stance when it comes to education. There is no second thought to it when it comes to our group recommending this site as a powerful e-learning tool.

**References**

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