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Redaktion

Björn Falkevall

Gull-Britt Larsson, redaktionssekreterare

Anna Bergström

Lars Lindström

Per-Olof Wickman

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Redaktionsråd

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A critical analysis of foreign language learning tasks

Summary

Our research project examines the critical analysis of learning tasks used in the foreign language classroom. The main objective of the project is to develop a critical attitude towards foreign language learning tasks on the part of the foreign language teacher. To this end, the project seeks to improve the ability of (trainee) foreign language teachers to analyse the effectiveness of printed classroom learning tasks in the acquisition of foreign language communicative competence. The paper intends to give the reader some insight into the what and how of critically analysing these tasks. The paper starts with the global discussion of a theory-based model underlying this analysis. The notions of learning activity and learning action, central to the model, are explained and concrete examples are provided. Next, the paper focuses on one category of learning tasks by sketching questions for the analysing of tasks oriented towards reading strategies. The paper ends with the presentation of an analysis of a German learning task, in which learners have to guess unknown words from context.

Introduction

Recent educational developments in the Netherlands, such as the implementation of a basic core-curriculum in the early years of secondary education and the so-called Studyhouse (the new curriculum in upper secondary education) focus on learning activities of learners within rich learning environments to be provided by teachers. Teachers, then, need to develop a critical attitude towards learning tasks to be carried out by their pupils.

According to the report "Horizon Taal" (van Els, 1990), published by the Dutch National Action Program of Foreign Languages, trainee foreign language teachers have gained too limited an ability to critically analyse

learning materials. The report recommends foreign language educational training institutes to train their students more extensively in critically handling learning materials.

The report has led Westhoff and three foreign language teachers to conduct a preparatory study (Westhoff, 1996) in order to investigate the possible applications of a qualitative materials analysis by foreign language teachers. The relevancy of this study to the current research project¹ is threefold.

Firstly, the study has laid down a theoretical basis for the critical analysis of learning tasks by detailing three indicators of the effectiveness of learning tasks: the learning action to be executed, the assignment to elicit the learning action and the materials involved. Next, the study has developed an instrument for the critical analysis of vocabulary tasks, which we consider a promising starting point for our study. Finally, the study has investigated the potential learning effect of the instrument on the part of foreign language teachers. The study found some indications that training sessions spent on the analysis of vocabulary tasks made foreign language teachers more critical towards learning tasks.

Our research project is meant to explore the potentially supportive role of a theory-based model in the critical analysis of learning materials. The following research questions have been formulated:

- 1) Is it possible to construct a model, based on theory and research on the acquisition of foreign language communicative competence, for the analysis of the effectiveness of printed foreign language learning tasks?
- 2) What is the validity of this model?
- 3) What are the characteristics of effective training sessions based on this model and aimed at improving the ability of (trainee) foreign language teachers to analyse the effectiveness of printed foreign language learning tasks?
- 4) What is the learning effect of these training sessions: does the ability of (trainee) foreign language teachers in analysing the effectiveness of printed foreign language learning tasks improve as a result?

The effectiveness of foreign language learning tasks

In our research project, we view the critical analysis of foreign language learning tasks as the analysis of the effectiveness of foreign language learning tasks. As stated earlier, the effectiveness of foreign language tasks consists of three aspects: the learning action to be executed, the assignment eliciting the learning action and the materials involved.

Foreign language learning tasks are tasks requiring the student to process or produce the target language in order to acquire or consolidate her communicative competence in the target language. Such tasks are part of the curriculum at the micro-level (learning materials, teaching package or textbook/workbook), which is to be distinguished from the curriculum at respectively the middle-level (school work plan) and the macro-level (school curriculum). Tasks exist in printed and non-printed form (e.g. educational software).

The task analysis we aim at in this research project is qualitative in nature and in the literature is known as a prospective evaluative analysis. A prospective evaluative analysis starts from theoretical assumptions.

- The model underlying our task analysis consists of five parts:
1. the model formulates and describes learning activities relating to the acquisition of foreign language communicative competence.
 2. the model formulates and describes learning actions into which these learning activities can be realised.
 3. the model formulates questions for the analysis of the effectiveness of the learning action(s) intended by the learning task.
 4. the model formulates questions for the analysis of the effectiveness of the assignment(s) in the learning task.
 5. the model formulates questions for the analysis of the effectiveness of materials added to the learning task.

In this paper we choose to focus on the first three parts of the model.

Learning activities in classroom-based foreign language learning

In this paragraph, we discuss theoretical positions on second language acquisition that have led us to distinguish between a number of categories of learning activities that will be discerned in the remainder of this paragraph. These learning activities all focus on the acquisition of communicative foreign language competence in a school-based context:

- * content oriented processing
- * producing (pushed) output: formulaic speech
- * producing (pushed) output: creative speech
- * form oriented processing
- * imprinting
- * strategic handling: receptive strategies
- * strategic handling: productive strategies

The categories are a continuation of Westhoff's work (Westhoff, 1999), who distinguished, apart from an input component, between content oriented processing, form oriented processing, (pushed) output, imprinting and acting strategically. The traditional distinction between the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) made in foreign language teaching methodology literature is at odds with the learning activities we propose, a point that will be made clear below.

The importance of these learning activities is that the first step in our critical analysis of a learning task is assessing the nature of the learning activity implied in the task.

Content oriented processing

All theories on L2-acquisition acknowledge the necessity of input although different theoretical positions are taken regarding the relative importance of input for L2-acquisition. According to Krashen's *input hypothesis* (Krashen, 1981) a language is exclusively acquired by processing meaningful, comprehensible input occurring automatically and subconsciously when the focus is on understanding the content of the language input. Acquisition leads to implicit knowledge and is to be distinguished from learning, which occurs non-automatically and consciously and leads to explicit knowledge. Explicit and implicit knowledge are stored separately in the human memory. As speakers usually make use of implicit knowledge when comprehending or producing the target language, the acquisition of implicit knowledge is most important.

Krashen emphasises the importance of input that is *comprehensible plus one*. This is input just beyond the current competency level of the learner. Yet, learners can comprehend this level of input by means of the linguistic context, their knowledge-of-the-world and extra-linguistic knowledge. Laufer (1997) operationalises the notion of comprehensibility by stating that knowledge of 95 % of the words in a text is minimally required for (most) comprehension.

Krashen's hypothesis that the acquisition of new words and structures occurs as a by-product of comprehending spoken or written communication, points to the importance of extensive reading and listening tasks in textbooks requiring the construction of the overall meaning of the text.

Examples of learning tasks focusing on content oriented processing, are tasks in which learners have to summarise the particular text or to answer yes-no questions on specific details in the text. Such tasks apply both to written and spoken texts.

The two-fold character of producing output: formulaic speech versus creative speech

Krashen's hypothesis that a language is acquired exclusively by processing meaningful, comprehensible input is not generally accepted. Swain (1985) proposes the *comprehensible output hypothesis* predicting that language acquisition also occurs when learners are asked to express messages in the target language, for which their linguistic means are inadequate. The attempts of learners pushed to use alternative means to get their message across precisely, coherently and appropriately (*pushed output*), lead to the acquisition of new linguistic means. Empirical evidence supporting the comprehensible output hypothesis is given by the results of immersion studies (e.g. Harley & Swain, 1984). In line with Pica (1989), we use the term output only to refer to extended discourse.

Swain (1995) describes four functions of (pushed) output:

- * pushed output enhances fluency in the target language.
- * pushed output makes learners aware of gaps in their knowledge of the target language.
- * pushed output gives opportunities for the testing of hypotheses on the target language.
- * pushed output leads to control and internalisation of linguistic knowledge of the target language.

The literature distinguishes between two types of productive use of language: formulaic speech and creative speech. Although in practice the distinction is not always clear-cut (see e.g. Myles, Hooper, & Michel, 1998), a theoretical distinction is feasible. *Creative speech* refers to the production of language, whereas formulaic speech refers to the production of non-analysed lexical units (also indicated as phrases, chunks or formulae). *Formulaic speech* is a very broad term and incorporates both entirely fixed strings (How are you?) and sequences with open slots (Can you _____?). Moreover, language formulas can be shared by an entire speech community or can be entirely idiosyncratic (Peters, 1983). Weinert (1995) claims that the phenomenon of formulaic speech in language acquisition is far from marginal, a claim supported empirically by Myles, Hooper, & Michel (1998), who reported that formulaic speech contributes to the emergence of creative speech. Consequently, opportunities for using and combining chunks during conversational interaction are very worthwhile.

An example of a learning task focusing on the production of creative speech is a task in which learners have to talk about how they spent last weekend by using the past tense (only creative speech if the sentences to be

produced have not already been learnt by heart). Examples of learning tasks involving the production of formulaic speech are tasks in which learners have to substitute parts of multi-word phrases in a dialogue. In both cases, such output tasks apply both to oral and written output.

Form oriented processing

Form oriented processing in L2 can be elicited by a variety of teaching techniques. Spada (1997) uses the umbrella word *form-focused instruction* to refer to "any pedagogical event used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" and makes a main distinction between explicit and implicit form-focused instruction. Ellis (1986) employs the term *formal instruction* to all attempts in the second-language classroom to raise the learners' awareness of the nature of target language rules in order to assist learning. We follow Spada's broad definition.

The positive contribution of form-focused instruction to the acquisition of the target language is well established in SLA-research, e.g. Spada (1997). Studies have established that form-focused instruction leads to an increased rate of acquisition of the target language and to an increased accuracy in the target language. However, the effect of form-focused instruction is, usually, indirect and delayed as the teaching of specific formal aspects does not always result in their acquisition. *The weak interface hypothesis* (Ellis, 1990) explains why the effect of explicit knowledge is (normally) indirect and delayed: explicit knowledge of formal aspects of the target language triggers selective attention to formal aspects in input, which in turn may lead to implicit knowledge of formal aspects of the target language.

Well-known learning tasks focusing on form oriented processing of L2 are tasks in which learners have to infer new target language rules from specific language input and tasks presenting new target language rules and asking learners to apply the new rules in language at the sentence-level. Indeed, the traditional teaching of grammar in foreign language (if oriented towards the comprehension and production of structures at the sentence-level) usually falls into this category of learning activity. In form oriented processing of L2 all four language skills may be involved.

Imprinting

Imprinting activities aim at the retention of lexical units (isolated words and multi-word phrases) as well as rules. In this paper we only discuss the imprinting of lexical units. This involves the intentional learning of orthographic and phonological forms, their corresponding meaning and the ability of using the lexical units in their correct syntactic and pragmatic context.

Although the *incidental vocabulary learning hypothesis* predicts that vocabulary can be acquired entirely incidentally (especially if new words occur repeatedly in language input), it has been shown that the intentional learning of vocabulary has a function of its own within the context of school-based foreign language acquisition:

* beginning L2-readers don't possess a sufficiently large vocabulary reservoir to enable them to guess new words from context when extensively reading texts, see e.g. Laufer (1997).

* the combination of incidental and intentional vocabulary acquisition is superior to the incidental acquisition of vocabulary through reading, see e.g. Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus (1996).

* the acquisition of vocabulary by means of extensive reading is time-consuming, see e.g. Mondria & Mondria-de Vries (1997).

* multiword phrases are not at all learned well incidentally, see e.g. Bahns & Eldaw (1993).

It is generally agreed that intensive and varied processing of new words is required for their retention in the long term, e.g. Stahl & Fairbanks (1986) and Groot (1999). Thus, mental processing should involve different features of the target words, such as morphological, phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features.

A variety of imprinting tasks has been developed, ranging from tasks involving rote learning of bilingual lists to tasks in which learners have to draw pictures of the new words. In imprinting tasks, each of the four language skills may be involved.

Strategical handling: receptive strategies

Most researchers agree that strategic knowledge is an important part of communicative competence (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980), although not all researchers agree whether or not strategies need to be explicitly taught. Researchers advocating explicit strategy instruction suggest that instruction makes learners aware of the nature and potential applications of those strategies learners already possess in their mother tongue. Moreover, it stimulates the use of strategies and provides opportunities for practice so that the use of strategies can become automated.

Apart from these theoretical considerations, there is in the Dutch educational context a pragmatic reason for explicit instruction of receptive strategies. In the revised basic secondary education attainment targets of foreign language learning (Staatsen, Meijer, Mulder, Stoks, & van Toorenburg,

1998) various compensatory interpretation strategies in the domain of reading comprehension and listening comprehension are specified.

It is generally assumed that the effective training of receptive strategies involves both the cognitive domain and the metacognitive domain. Westhoff (1981) states that learners can enhance their metacognitive competence by *reflecting* on the planning and execution of strategies. His viewpoint is, to some extent, empirically supported by Mulder (1996). Both assumptions carry clear implications for the questions to formulate with respect to tasks in the domain of reading and listening strategies.

Examples of learning tasks focusing on receptive strategies, are tasks in which learners have to guess the meaning of unknown words from context and tasks in which learners have to predict the content of the text by means of title, subtitle and illustrations. Such tasks apply both to oral and written texts.

Strategical handling: productive strategies

When speaking of productive strategies in L2, we refer to compensatory strategies. We start from a broad definition. *Compensatory strategies* include strategies used in the case of problems in planning and producing speech and strategies used in the case of communication problems experienced after speech production.

Researchers advocating explicit instruction in productive strategies suggest that instruction makes learners aware of nature and potential applications of strategies that learners already possess in their mother tongue. Moreover, instruction stimulates the use of strategies and it provides opportunities for practice so that the use of strategies can become automated. Finally, application of some strategies may require specific lexical knowledge of the target language, which may have to be taught.

In the Dutch educational context, the revised basic secondary education attainment targets of foreign language learning (Staatsen et al., 1998) specify several productive strategies in the domain of conversation skills. As such, these attainments are another reason why productive strategies should be taught.

At present, research in compensatory strategies is scarce, but some indications for the feasibility of strategy training is reported by Dörnyei (1995) and Cohen, Weaver, & Li (1995).

Examples of productive strategies are paraphrasing and selecting the correct register for starting a conversation.

Learning actions

The preceding paragraph discussed learning activities. We now pass on to the discussion of concrete (learning) actions into which the above mentioned learning activities can be realised. Assessing the nature of the learning action being elicited by the assignment of the learning task constitutes the second step in the critical analysis of learning tasks.

Westhoff (1998) informs us about the relationship between learning activity and learning action by pointing out that there is no one-to-one correspondence between them: a learning activity can be realised by various learning actions and on the other hand a learning action may relate to various learning activities.

Learning actions are actions (usually mental in nature within the context of classroom based foreign language acquisition) being carried out by learners in teaching-learning situations. They are elicited by means of assignments given by the teacher, the learning task, the learner's classmates or the learner herself. An assignment can elicit either one or several learning actions.

The execution of a learning action results in a concrete product (for instance a summary of a text, a written answer to a question, a spoken dialogue). The carrying out of a learning action is supposed to contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge or skills in the subject matter at hand or the consolidation of already acquired knowledge and skills.

Learning actions are carried out by the processing on materials included in the learning task. In the context of the foreign language classroom the term materials refers to all types of target language input and target language rules. Processing materials involves the handling of specific features of the materials for instance phonological, syntactical, semantic, morphological or pragmatic features.

Westhoff (1996) assumes the effectiveness of a learning action to be dependent on the relevancy of the features of the materials in the light of the intended learning activity as well as the richness in features (number and variety of features) of the materials processed. This assumption carries clear implications for the questions to formulate with respect to the effectiveness of learning actions.

We end this section with a listing of learning actions (table 1) potentially contributing to the acquisition of foreign language communicative competence. We want to emphasise that the list is not meant to be exhaustive. In the table we give only some examples of learning tasks.

Learning action	Description
<i>Reproducing</i>	Reproducing the lexical units without any changes to the <i>se</i> units (literal repetition). e.g. writing down the days of the week in one's work-book, by copying them from the textbook.
<i>Ranking</i>	Ranking the lexical units by virtue of a shared feature. The feature will be ordinal in nature. Consequently, the position of the lexical units in the ranking is dependent on the extent to which the feature also applies to the other lexical units. If the name of the feature is not given, then a second learning action is elicited: generalising.
<i>Categorising</i>	Categorising the lexical units into one or more groups. Groups are being distinguished by virtue of one or more features shared between the lexical units: lexical units put in the same category share at least the distinguishing feature(s) of that category. If the features are not given, then a second learning action is elicited: generalising.
<i>Visualising</i>	e.g. choose the odd man out (categorising + generalising). Linking the lexical unit to a visual representation showing important and representative aspects of the (core) meaning of the particular lexical unit.
<i>Elaborating</i>	Establishing links between (sequences ² of) lexical unit(s) and knowledge already stored in the memory. The links are either linguistic in nature and thus based on a knowledge of the target language/other languages or logical in nature and based on knowledge of the subject matter/word knowledge.
<i>Relating</i>	Establishing links between (sequences of) lexical unit(s) being processed. Links may be stated explicitly, but not necessarily so. The links are linguistic in nature and thus based on knowledge of the target language/other languages or logical in nature based on knowledge of the subject matter/knowledge-of-the-world.
<i>Associating</i>	Establishing links between (sequences of) lexical unit(s) and knowledge already stored in the memory. The links are associative in nature. The links have a more or less idiosyncratic character and are based on the learner's experiences, feelings, actions, sensations (e.g. smells, tastes), fantasy and creativity on the part of the learner.
<i>Generalising</i>	e.g. remembering the gender of French nouns in terms of colours: blue for masculine nouns and rose-coloured for feminine nouns. Deducing and formulating a rule (or formula, principle, algorithm, heuristic). The rule (or formula, principle, algorithm, heuristic) is deduced by means of one or more shared features of the lexical units. The rule (or formula, principle, algorithm, heuristic) is intended to be used for the production of new (sequences of) lexical units or for the understanding of (sequences of) lexical units.

Applying

Using explicit knowledge (i.e. an explicitly formulated rule/formula/principle/algorithm/heuristic) either to produce new (sequences of) lexical units or to understand (sequences of) lexical units.

e.g. guessing words from context.

Recombining

e.g. putting words in the plural (regular nouns).

Using implicit knowledge to produce new (sequences of) lexical units either by substituting one or more parts of already encoded lexical units or by combining already encoded lexical units with other lexical units.

Contextualising

Putting the lexical unit in a sentence that is semantically, syntactically and pragmatically well-formed.

Table 1. Learning actions in classroom-based second language acquisition

Strategical handling: receptive strategies

Receptive strategies concern both reading strategies and listening strategies. This paragraph focuses on the analysis of tasks aimed at reading strategies. Questions discussed relate to the explanation, the carrying out and reflection on reading strategies.

Analysing the effectiveness of the learning action is the third step in the critical analysis of learning actions.

Explanation of the reading strategy

Are important aspects of the reading strategy being described?

The learner is given all the specific information required for the understanding (and execution) of the particular reading strategy. The learner should also be informed that carrying out the strategy does not guarantee a successful solution of the reading problem, but promotes it further.

Example guessing the meanings of new words from context

- * The learner is informed not to guess the meaning of every unknown word, but only the words essential to general comprehension of the text. Schouten-van Pareren (1985).
- * The learner is informed that comprehension of a word's meaning may occur at different levels and that comprehension at the highest level is not always required. Curtis (1987)
- * The learner is informed to look first for contextual clues in the immediate context (within the sentence) of the unknown word and then to look for contextual clues in the larger context (i.e. other sentences in the same paragraph, sentences in other paragraphs or other chapters). Nation & Coady (1988) and Groot (1998).
- * The learner is informed in what order to use contextual clues. Firstly, clues at the morpho—syntactic level should be used (the syntactic pattern of the sentence and the position of the unknown word in the sentence), next clues at the semantic level (the meaning of the words surrounding the unknown word) and finally clues at the lexical level (the unknown word itself).
- * The learner is informed that there are words you can't guess. It is made clear that looking for contextual clues for the unknown word will not help if there are no clues to exploit, if the contextual clues are not usable, if the clues are misleading or partial, if the clues are easily suppressed by the learner. Examples are provided of non-existent clues, unusable clues, misleading clues, partial clues and suppressed clues. (Laufer, 1997).
- * The learner is informed to use all sources of knowledge available when using contextual clues: knowledge of the foreign language, the mother tongue and other foreign languages as well as knowledge-of-the-world
- * The learner is informed that guessing does not guarantee success (because the strategy of guessing is a heuristic and not an algorithm).
- * The learner is informed that checking one's guess is necessary and that checking should start at the syntactic level and only then at the semantic level. That is, the learner is informed to verify if the word class of the guessed meaning is identical to the meaning in the text and solely then whether or not the guessed meaning makes sense in the text. Nation & Coady (1988)
- * The learner is informed that when using information within the word itself, she should already have made use of contextual information (in order to avoid incorrect guesses based entirely on word form). Nation & Coady (1988).

Is the learner told how (criteria) to evaluate the applied reading strategy?

The learner is informed that she needs to verify whether or not the carrying out of the strategy has resulted in the expected result. The evaluation criteria provided should be concrete and their formulation should be clear, concise, unambiguous and comprehensible. The learner should be informed what steps to take when the expected result is not achieved.

Example guessing the meanings of new words from context

- * The learner is informed to check if the part of speech of the guess is the same as the part of speech of the unknown word. Nation & Coady (1988)
- * The learner is informed to break up the unknown word into parts and see if the meanings of the parts do relate to the guess. Nation & Coady (1988)
- * The learner is informed to substitute the guess for the unknown word and verify if the guessed meaning makes sense in context. Nation & Coady (1988)
- * The learner is informed to use a dictionary to check once again the guessed meaning. Nation & Coady (1988)

Other questions concerning the explanation of the reading strategy are:

- * Is the learner told when (in which situations) the reading strategy can be applied?
- * Is the learner told how to apply the reading strategy?

Carrying out the reading strategy

Does the learner have enough knowledge of the target language and enough knowledge-of-the-world to be able to apply the reading strategy?

Obviously, the amount of prior knowledge required depends on the type of reading strategy in question.

Example guessing the meanings of new words from context

- * the unknown word occurs in a variety of contexts. Nation & Coady (1988).
- * the unknown word is important in the text. Nation & Coady (1988).
- * the context of the word is (very) constrained (read: very redundant). This means that the context contains a variety of clues (semantic, syntactic, morpho-syntactic in nature) to the meaning of the unknown word. (Kelly, 1990).
- * contextual clues to the meaning of the unknown word can be used, because the learner knows the meaning of these clues. Laufer (1997).
- * clues containing by the unknown word itself are not misleading nor partial. Counter-examples are idioms, false friends, words with more meanings than the learner knows and unknown words that resemble very closely words the learner knows the meaning of). Laufer (1997).
- * the context of the unknown word is (at least) between five and ten words and there is (usable) context on both sides of the unknown word. Aborn, Rubenstein, & Sterling (1959).

Other questions concerning the carrying out of the reading strategy are:

- * Is the learner practising the reading strategy intensively and variedly?
- * Is the learner practising the reading strategy in a situation resembling closely situations outside the classroom to which the strategy may be applied?

Reflection on the reading strategy being carried out

Is the learner required to evaluate the reading strategy being carried out?
The learner is urged to verify whether or not the strategy has been successful. If the strategy is not successful, the learner is encouraged to undertake new steps so that the evaluation is not an end to itself, but results – if necessary – in further actions of the learner.

Other questions concerning the reflection on the reading strategy are:

- * Is the learner required to select an appropriate reading strategy?
- * Is the learner required to make explicit why and how she carried out the reading strategy?

Guessing unknown words: a task analysis

In this section we present an analysis of a learning task. We want to repeat that the main objective of our project is to improve the ability of (trainee) foreign language teachers to analyse the effectiveness of printed foreign language learning tasks. This means that the task analysis is not an end in itself. In fact, the project is mainly interested in the learning effect of analysing learning tasks; the products of these analysing processes will be seen and interpreted against this background. The analysis presented here, however, is not realised by foreign language teachers but by the authors of this paper. It is meant to serve as an example of a critical task analysis. However, in the research project we are interested solely in the analyses of learning tasks done by the teachers themselves.

The learning task at hand is selected from a German textbook (Bimmel et al., 1997) frequently being used at lower levels of secondary education in the Netherlands. In this task learners have to guess the meaning of some unknown German words. The analysis presented below applies to the first three parts of our analysis model (see § 2).

Description of the task

Wenn du ein Wort in einem Deutschen Text nicht verstehst, kannst du versuchen die Bedeutung zu erraten. Die Tips in Strategie 9 (Textbuch Seite 178) helfen dabei. Im Text hierneben stehen einige Phantasiewörter.

- A Errate bitte, was die Phantasiewörter (ungefähr) bedeuten.
B Schreib bitte auf, wie du diese Bedeutung herausgefunden hast.

When you don't know the meaning of a word in a German text, you can try to guess its meaning. The tips in Strategy 9 (Textbook page 178) help you. In the text below you will find some phantasy words.

- A Guess the (approximate) meaning of the phantasy words.
B Make a note telling how you found their meanings]

Schülerin Braunschweig. 'Ich unternehme viel mit meiner Freundin. Bei einem Jugendtreffen hat ich mein jetziger Brumpf zu einem Konzert genösel. Um einem Mürner von mir aus anzusprechen, müßte ich ihn schon länger örksehen'.

<i>Phantasiewort</i> [Phantasyword]	<i>Bedeutung</i> [meaning]	<i>Wie hast du das Herausgefunden?</i> [motivate your answer]
.....
.....

(in a loose translation by the authors)

Explanation of the reading strategy

STR 9 in the textbook: Guessing of words: tips (loosely translated from German)

If you meet a word in a German text you don't know the meaning of, then you can try to guess the meaning (approximately). The following tips may be helpful:

- 1 don't concentrate on the word itself.
- 2 look for word(s) in the context that fit the meaning of the target word. For instance, if you read the following sentence 'Kräsche sind oft schlucherner als Mädchen'. *Kräsche* is in this sentence compared with 'Mädchen'. The meaning of the unknown word should fit this word.
- 3 guess the meaning. In the example above you can guess that *Kräsche* has to signify boys. You need not always guess the exact meaning. It is usually enough if you guess the *approximate* meaning.
- 4 Don't look at the text. Try to imagine what the text would be if you insert the meaning you guessed. Is this ok with the rest of the text?

(in a loose translation by the authors)

Analysis of the task

1. The nature of the learning activity: The receptive strategy of guessing the meaning of new words.
2. The nature of the learning action: The learning action is applying. The learner is asked to apply a word guessing strategy.
3. The effectiveness of the learning action.

Are important aspects of the strategy being described?

- * The use of the meaning of other words in the immediate context is hinted at, but not described in detail.
- * The use of the position of the unknown word in the sentence is not described at all, neither the use of the syntactic format of this sentence.
- * The use of syntactic or morphological information of the word itself is not described at all
- * The limited length of the text in the learning task (and of the example) excludes the possibility of learning to use the wider context of the unknown word.
- * The tip 'don't concentrate on the unknown word itself' is unfortunate. It is meant as an advice to use clues elsewhere in the sentence, but there are cases that the unknown word itself contains useful clues so that there are cases in which concentration on the word itself is very useful.
- * The example is somewhat unfortunate: it is not unthinkable that the learner does not understand the word *schlucherner*: two unknown words in one single sentence complicates the correct guessing of the word *Kräsche*. Moreover, the example proposes to compare the word *Kräsche* with the word *Mädchen* and that the unknown word should fit in with this, a rather vague advice. In the example, this clue could lead to the incorrect guess *Kräsche* means women.
- * The statement that it is not absolutely necessary to guess the exact meaning' is not relevant. It would have been more accurate to say that knowledge of a word's meaning may exist at different levels and so does guessing. Consequently, for a general understanding of a text, it is not always necessary to completely understand an unknown word. However, there are cases in which comprehension at the highest level of the word is necessary. In the case of this example, different levels of comprehension of the word *Kräsche* would have been useful (iving human beings – persons – adults – men).
- * The assignment refers to Strategy 9 in the textbook. However, there are other guessing strategies possible. For instance, when an unknown word is a cognate or when the unknown word consists of words the learner already knows. This means that a reference to strategy 3 as well as to strategies 14 and 18 in the textbook would have been useful. If not referred to in this task (which could be a deliberate and arguable choice), it is essential this is done in later learning tasks, because an integration of different word guessing strategies is needed.

Does the learner possess enough knowledge of the target language and enough knowledge-of-the-world to apply the strategy?

* This does not seem to be the case. Although the unknown words themselves contain clues (the word category to which they belong is made clear by means of prefix *ge-* or suffix *-en* and by their position in the sentence (main *jeztiger* —; um *ei*nem —), the main problem is that there are too many unknown words in the text. Moreover, the four unknown words are presented in only two sentences.

* Another problem is that the words don't reappear in other sentences.

* A third problem is the fact that the context is not very constraining. The sentence with the word *Orkschen* could, for instance, be replaced both by the words 'to like' or 'be acquainted with'.

Is the learner required to evaluate the strategy being carried out?

* In the assignment the learner is not asked to verify the guessed meaning by checking if the guess makes sense in the context and the overall story line.

* Neither is the learner asked to consult a dictionary or glossary. However, information on the word guessing strategy in the textbook does hint at a verification stage, but its value is limited as only one checking procedure is described: does the word make sense in the text?

* The use of dictionary or glossary is not mentioned in the explanation of the strategy in the textbook.

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Notes

- 1 The research project is carried out under the auspices of the ILOS Institute of Education and the German Expertise Centre.
- 2 Sequences of lexical units are propositions and groups of propositions in a written or spoken text.