Resource Data Bases for Self-access Language Learning

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Abstract

Intensive training in foreign languages other than English requires the purposeful construction of a learning environment conducive to acquisition, which is not normally given in Hong Kong. To this end, the *B.A. (Hons) in European Studies* programme set up a separate self-access learning unit (SALU), comprising learning material of all media formats. This report on its German-language component outlines the experiences in structuring the SALU in such a way that effective utilisation of resources could be achieved. Contrary to the popular myth of 'learner autonomy', it was found that students require intensive guidance by a curriculum-driven reference system (Study Paths) *before* meaningful independent learning can develop. It was also found that Internet-based forms of (language) learning become increasingly popular without, however, diminishing the need for careful linkage between self-access learning materials and the classroom syllabus. Despite these improvements in infrastructure and the (cognitive) mapping of resources onto the curriculum progression, intensive 1:1 counseling remains the prime obligation for teachers. The use of 'advanced' technology and an abundance of physical resources cannot replace the 'human factor' – on the contrary.

Background

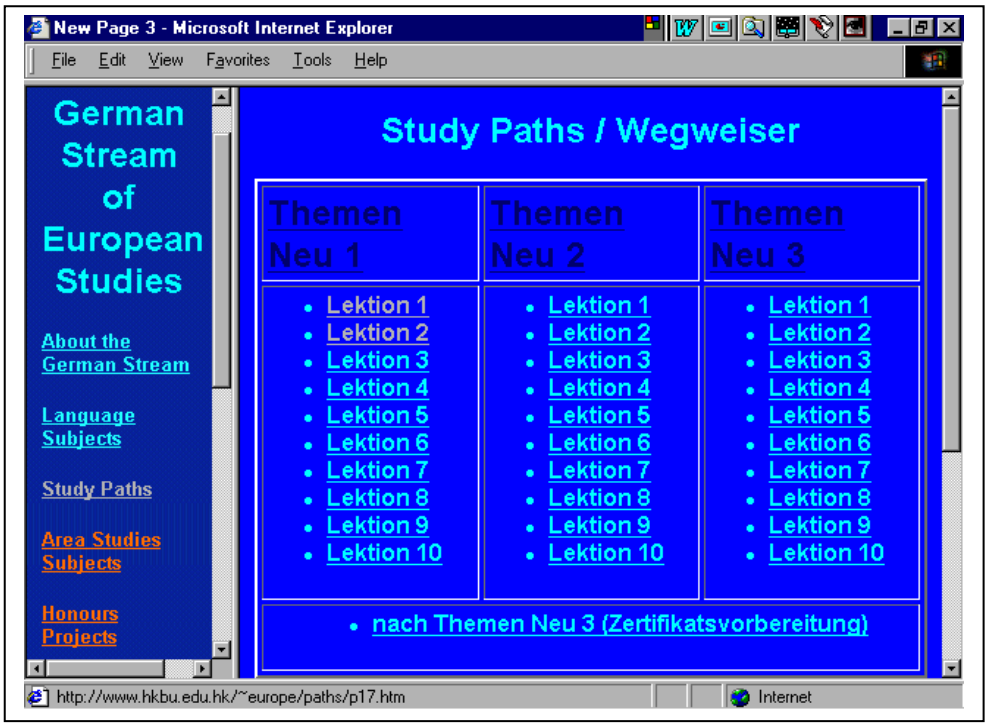
The 1990s have seen enormous interest in concepts of self-access language learning (cf. e.g. Gardner, & Miller 1994). All tertiary institutions in Hong Kong built up impressive self-access learning centres, mostly for English and Chinese. There is agreement in principle that a student's ability (and opportunity) to make individual decisions about her learning practice is beneficial for the overall learning process (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1987; and Little, 1995). Self-directed, 'autonomous' learning was advocated as an aim in itself, a pillar of 'critical' and 'humanistic' education (Benson, 1994; and Pang, 1994). In an environment, however, which previously had done little to encourage student's self-initiatives, it was also evident that substantial supportive action was necessary to 'train learners for independence' (Tong, 1994) in the first place. To this end, accompanying counseling routines, 'self-access logs' (Martyn, 1994) and other means were developed. While no one doubted the explicit goal of creating 'independent', 'critical' learners, these actions also aimed at improving the usage rates of self-access materials, or – in other words – improving the return on the costly investment in such centres.

The B.A. (Hons) in European Studies course at HKBU, a four-year course established in 1994, was no exception. It requires students (all of whom are *ab initio* learners) to become basically fluent in French or German within four semesters. Language tuition, however, comprises only about 40% of the teaching units. To provide additional language exposure, the course team established a Self-Access Learning Unit (SALU) in 1995. The SALU offers study materials in all media formats, which students normally use between three to ten hours per week on top of the scheduled classroom hours. The German Stream of the course alone, now provides several hundred print volumes (text and exercise books, general reading materials, papers and magazines), video and tapes, CD-ROMs and approximately 1,000 hours of language exercises on floppy disks and an

HKBU server. Since 1998, online learning opportunities (WWW links and self-designed interactive exercises) have been continuously added.

However, earlier projects (Hess, 1996) showed that the mere availability of self-access learning materials does not guarantee their actual usage, despite the recommended counseling and the use of self-access logs. Moreover, our students did not automatically become 'autonomous' learners simply by having the means at hand. Instead, when faced with the SALU holdings, students complained about difficulties in finding suitable material commensurate to their acquisitional level. In a curious reverse process, they gradually resorted to using ever less items the more the collection as a whole expanded. An 'independent' drive to explore the vast range of available materials could not be observed with any student – for an obvious reason: there are severe time constraints for students faced with a packed course curriculum, as is normal in Hong Kong. Having to cope with up to 25 hours / week in the classroom (plus accompanying reading and presentation assignments), students rightly see 'autonomous', curiosity-driven exploration of self-access resources as rather impossible. The past years of tertiary 'expansion' gave them a materially 'enriched' learning environment. Adding such material wealth to an otherwise unchanged system of tertiary education, however, does not necessarily improve learning *per se*.

Figure 1: 'Study Paths' resource data base



In response to that situation, the German Stream decided to develop a gradual approach to self-access learning. It designed a system of 30 so-called Study Paths (Lernwegweiser), in line with the progression of the standard textbook used in class (Figure 1). Study Paths are reference lists, which correlate excerpts of the SALU holdings with the syllabus of the first two years of the course. The correlation is based on an analysis of topics and grammar / vocabulary of the course book. At all moments, the Study Paths allow immediate access to additional learning material commensurate with the level reached in class. By using the Study Paths, students have a guarantee that each self-access item listed is indeed immediately 'useful' at the level presently reached and bears direct relevance to the classroom work – an aspect often confirmed as essential for effective self-access learning (Broady, 1999). Local proponents of 'autonomous learning' (e.g. Benson, 1994) have fiercely criticised such 'packaging of language learning' as a quasi-diabolical, 'capitalist' plot to turn students into passive 'consumers of commodities'. In Hong

Kong, however, students indeed pay a high price for education – and can rightly expect efficient service for their money.

The Study Path system indeed improved the efficiency of the SALU. An investigation in 1996-97, focusing on computer-based exercises, showed that students without access to such a guiding system hardly used the available materials at all. They were also highly critical of the alleged 'poor quality' of the SALU inventory. By contrast, the control group, which did use the then available Study Paths, reported a high rate of satisfaction with computer-assisted self-access learning. The control group also spent on the average far more time in the SALU (Hess, 1998). The Study Path system was therefore not only a useful tool for enhancing self-access learning. It was also cost-effective, as it led to a better utilisation rate of the expensive material collection.

Goals of this Project

To counter criticism of overly strict guidance, it was then decided to extend the (as yet rudimentary) Study Path system (for PC exercises) to cover the full range of materials on stock. We assumed that a growing number of reference entries per Study Path (i.e. per acquisitional level reached) would also allow broader scope for students' 'independent' selection of learning activities, while maintaining the advantage of the structured approach. Secondly, further online material was to be added, as students seemed to prefer computer-based forms of learning. Thirdly, the entire reference system was to be made available online as one comprehensive data base so as to provide easy access both within and without the SALU, i.e. to allow some degree of remote (home) self-access learning for the first time.

This project, therefore, was primarily concerned with (a) providing the material basis for meaningful, structured utilisation of self-access holdings. It then attempted (b) to find out the actual usage patterns of students in order to (c) optimise the presentation mode of SALU materials. This was an attempt to secure cost-effectiveness of the substantial investment in the self-access learning unit. But it also aimed at creating a sense of learning effectiveness among students themselves – beyond ideologically over-charged theories of 'autonomous' learning.

Methods and Measures

During the SALU expansion, students of Years I and II were informally observed during self-access hours over an extended period of time (1998-99). A questionnaire about SALU usage was administered in early 1999, and qualitative follow-up interviews were conducted with selected students in spring / summer 1999. With the help of an interview guidance sheet, the interviews were conducted in Cantonese by an older student of the same course (and then translated into English). These peer interviews yielded unrestrained, frank comments otherwise unobtainable by the teachers. By contrast, the earlier practice of having students keep self-access logs was abandoned. Students saw these more as a control measure rather than a helpful tool for subsequent counseling. The logs, often filled in haphazardly immediately before a counseling session, did not reflect the actual self-access practice.

Cycle I: Structuring the Resource Data Base

During the first action cycle, the Study Path systemwas structured according to the four basic skills in language learning (speaking, listening, reading, writing) and a categorisation of heavily structured (grammar) exercises (form-oriented) versus 'open' formats of speaking, reading / watching and writing (content-oriented). The separate category of computer-based,

formal exercises was maintained, and a new category for online material was added. The combination of these criteria led to the content structure shown in Figure 2, consistent in all Study Paths. The system was then put online (http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/themen.html).

The structuring allows direct access to appropriate material according to individual learning styles. 'Learning style' here refers to the intuitive preference for a distinct learning modality, such as visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning (cf. Read, 1987). These roughly correspond to the above basic skills of reading/watching, listening and speaking (i.e. interacting socially). Alternatively, one can distinguish between analytical and authority-oriented learning styles versus concrete (people-oriented) and communicative learning styles (cf. Ellis, 1994, p. 507). Analytical and authority-oriented learners prefer logical, didactic presentations, clear progressions and well-structured learning environments. One would expect that the data base system as a whole, and its form-oriented components in particular, appeal to this learner type. Content-oriented segments of the data base, by contrast, should stimulate the interest of concrete learners.

Figure 2: Study path reference categories

Category	**Predominantly trained language skills**
Sprechen/Aussprache	Speaking/phonetics (communicative skills and/or form-oriented)
Hören	Listening (content and/or form-oriented)
Grammatik/Wortschatz (per Computer)	Grammar/vocabulary by computer (form-oriented)
Lesen/Üben	Additional exercises (form-oriented)
Sehen	Watching/video (content and/or form-oriented)
Lesen	Further reading (content-oriented)
Internet Resources	Online exercises and reading (content and/or form-oriented)

Overlaps do occur between these categories (e.g. a listening exercise may require prior reading and/or subsequent formal exercise and/or writing a comment). Items are normally listed according to the predominant skill being trained. Icons next to the data base entry signal that additional material in other working modes is available.

In order to fill the Study Path reference subcategories, a three-step approach is required (see also Hess, 1998b

1. the segmentation of the course syllabus (first four semesters) according to topics, grammar, vocabulary and notions/functions embodied in each of the 30 lessons of the underlying course book Themen neu (Aufderstrasse 1992-1995);
2. the analysis of the selected additional self-access material according to the same categories as in (a);
3. break-up of these additional materials (often entire textbooks) into separate chunks, and the correlation of these chunks (lessons or individual, selected exercises/texts) with the 30-part course syllabus.

Ideally, each self-access component should be compatible with the corresponding lesson/Path level of the core textbook, i.e. it should not contain structures/vocabulary which go significantly beyond the acquisitional level of the students. It should also be thematically related to the textbook lessons whenever possible.

As it were, a bottleneck emerged in cycle I. The analysis / correlation process requires well qualified, experienced teachers, themselves intuitively familiar with both Themen neu classroom work and possible difficulties students may face with additionally selected material. These teachers are hard to find (especially in Hong Kong). Attempts via the Internet to find collaborators overseas (the textbook is used worldwide) were fruitless. Nearly all correlations therefore had to be done by the course team on top of normal teaching assignments.

Nonetheless, after more than one year, the Study Paths system now contains more than 1,400 entries (Figure 3). The amount of 'quality learning time' possible with these resources can only be roughly estimated at several thousand hours. Each category contains a sufficient number of entries (a) to allow self-access according to individual learning styles, and (b) to allow individual variation ('self-direction') within each Path or level of acquisition.

Figure: 3 Present scope of the resource data base

Category	**No. of entries**
speaking / phonetics	138
listening	95
grammar / vocabulary by computer	409
additional exercises	354
watching / video	134
further reading	49
Internet resources (including HKBU online exercises)	256
Total (25 Sept 99)	**1,435**

Following students' suggestions, the online version of the data base now uses frames to display the subcategories. On accessing the relevant Path, users are first reminded of the topic / grammar focus (the 'objective' of this particular self-access session) and can then enter the reference system according to their preferred learning mode without delay. Figures 4-7 show sample excerpts from the data base (*Study Path 1*).

Figure 4: Opening screen: Goals and subcategories according to learning preferences

Figure 5: Form-oriented references for 'analytical learners' (PC-based drills)

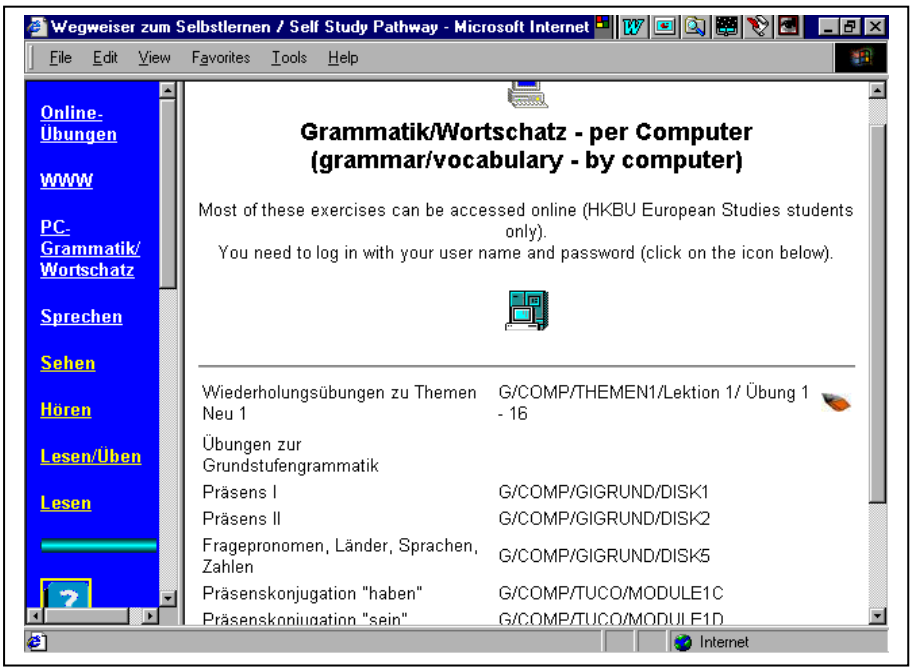


Figure 6: References for learners with 'auditive' learning preferences (Listening materials)

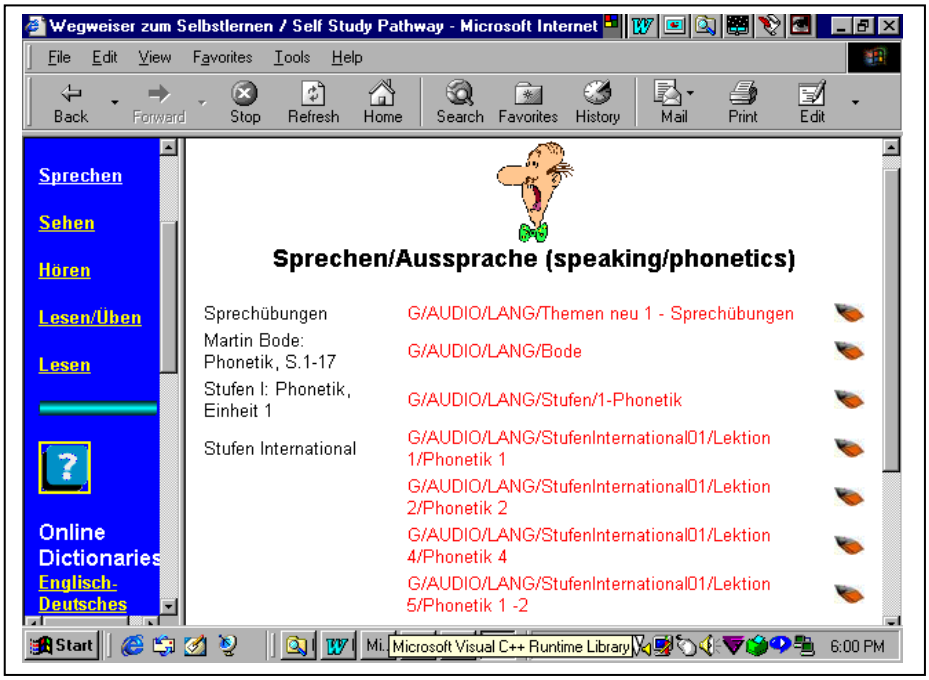
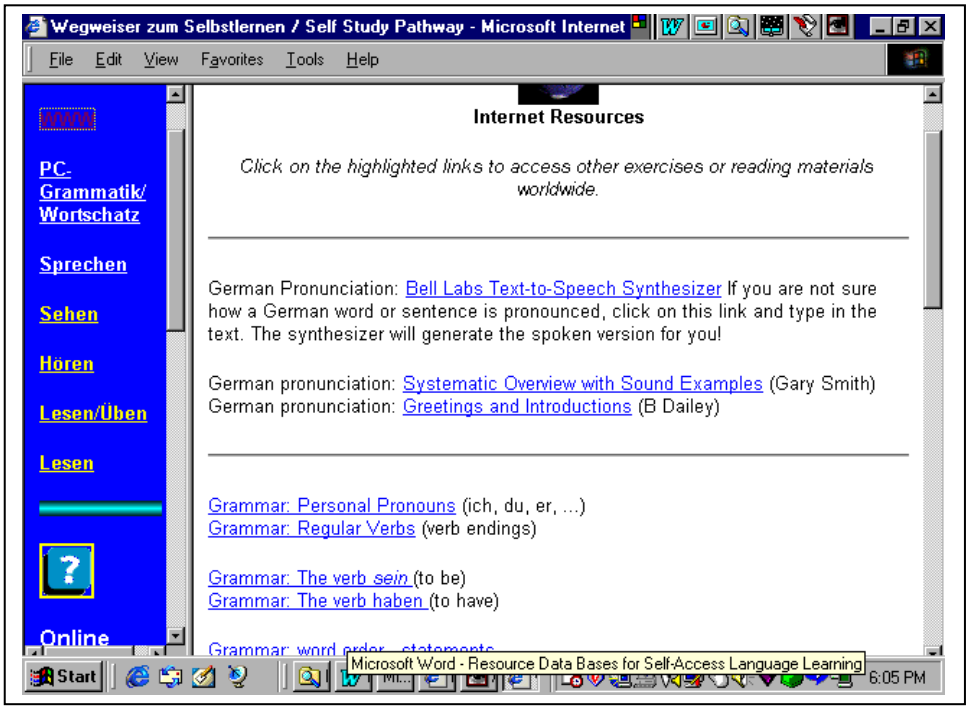


Figure 7: Mixed-type references for 'auditive' and 'analytic' learners (WWW resources)



Cycle II: Formative Evaluation

In the formative evaluation period (1998-99), students were casually observed during self-access practice. Students' and teachers' comments on the Study Path system and the SALU in general were recorded if and when they occurred. A questionnaire was administered in January 1999 to first and second-year students of the German stream (n=14+13). Semi-structured interviews with selected students followed in spring / summer 1999. The questionnaire contained 47 discrete items and open-ended questions. It asked students' opinions about the SALU in general (Part A), usage rates and satisfaction with the various media formats (Part B), and specifically about computer-assisted learning (Part C). Results are summarised below for both groups (first-year students = Yr I, second-year students = Yr II); abbreviations in brackets indicate the question number).

(A) Overall SALU Usage

79% Yr I and 85% Yr II spent three hours or more per week with self-access learning (50% / 54% more than 5 hours) (qA1). All students considered self-access as definitely necessary for their studies (qA3). 86% Yr I, but only 46% Yr II were satisfied with the unit maintenance. The difference indicates that the demands of students increase once they are familiar with self-access working modes. Equipment and learning materials were generally considered good or sufficient (qB5). Satisfaction rates with computing hardware, however, dropped in the second year, reflecting the growing needs of more advanced students (i.e. their desire to 'self-direct' their activities). The Study Path system was accessed both on the SALU premises and from home. As long as the majority of references pointed to material physically available only in the SALU, however, most self-access learning took place there – a severe restriction of self-learning possibilities, according to the students (for security and copyright reasons, the SALU does not lend out materials nor does it allow photocopying).

(B) Media Formats

Yr I students preferably used the Internet / WWW, audio tapes and e-mail. Yr II students shifted the focus to video and satellite TV, followed by audio tapes, Internet / WWW and e-mail (qB1). This reflects changing learning needs. In an intensive language course, the development of listening / speaking skills initially took preference for students (hence the use of audiolingual courseware), while interest in target society information matters and 'real-life' language use grew in Year II (hence the preference for videos).

Among electronic media, computer-assisted language learning (i.e. formal exercises / drills stored on a server) was not the preferred working mode. Only 36% (23%) used this component frequently (qB1); 21% (15%) even considered it the least frequently used (qB3), mainly due to technical problems ('Sometimes the PC can't run the software', qB4 / G2-3). CD-ROMs score lowest (qC5+6). Only 50% Yr I and 23% Yr II actually used them. CD-ROMS have to be borrowed from the SALU supervisor and are relatively complicated to handle. Students shied away from them with typical comments such as 'I don't know how to use it' (G1-4), 'It is not easily accessible' (G2-10), 'I don't have time to try them yet'. The most widely used electronic format was the Internet / WWW (qC1), but often for purposes other than language learning. Many students (78% / 54%) also accessed the WWW for 'relaxation' (qC16), i.e. they visited English / Chinese-language sites.

All the same, 71% / 92% of the students claimed that learning 'by computer' (which includes both drill software and the Internet / WWW) was useful for language acquisition (qC2). Significantly, 43% Yr I would have liked to have seen improvement of tailor-made learning software (qB6) as the number one priority, whereas 62% Yr II wanted immediate improvement of computing equipment (qB6). The latter reflects the need for increased processing speed while working with

the WWW – as well as a desire to leave the confines of prescribed exercises in favour of more 'independence'.

These answers confirm our own observations. Regardless of individual learning styles, students preferred self-access working modes with technical appliances, but were not generally satisfied with their scope and (technical) manageability. They increasingly cherished the obvious variety of net-based material, but were less intrigued by ready-made language learning software. By contrast, the traditional print media (exercise books, monographs/magazines) were considered sufficient and usable – which is another way of saying that they did not excite much enthusiasm. Contrary to our original project goal, students clearly did not appreciate added possibilities to work with print sources (textbook excerpts, magazines, etc). Once VCR, PC and WWW were introduced, students never looked back to these 'old-style' materials. The peer interviews, moreover, did not contain a single reference to voluntary work with print sources.

(C) Computer-assisted Learning

43% Yr I and 54% Yr II indicated frequent use of the Internet (including subject homepages of the course) (qC1). The increase is not surprising since major subjects in Year II are now web-supported (cf. Hess, 1999 in this volume). But there was also an increase in the use of language learning software (from 21% in Year I to 38% in Year II (qC1). 57%/69% were generally satisfied with the Internet, and 50%/62% felt that the computer-assisted language learning component was satisfactory (qC2). An explanation for the growing satisfaction lies in the fact that Year II students, experienced as they are, make more targeted use of the resources. Year I students, by contrast, do not yet have the same level of confidence in selecting from the vast resources available and tend to blame the 'poor quality' of the learning material for what is, in fact, their own initial disorientation. Answers to question qC4 further illustrate a need for more initial guidance to handle the data base effectively. 79% Yr I clearly had difficulties using the resources in a focused way, whereas 62% Yr II made use of the structured resource system as intended (i.e. via the Study Path system).

qC4. How do you <u>select</u> language learning software you want to work with?

	Year I	**Year II**
I don't know how to choose it	8%	_
Randomly	21%	8%
I ask classmates what I could choose	50%	30%
I check the self-study Pathways (Wegweiser) in the WWW	21%	62%
No answer	_	_

Strikingly, however, students in both groups tended to use only a very small selection of the available learning software. When asked to name the two titles most frequently accessed, Yr I reported Themen only, i.e. the PC exercises directly related to the course textbook. Yr II stated frequent use of just two extensive drill packages (TUCO, GIGRUND) (qC7). Both groups overwhelmingly thought that computer-based drills were useful or often useful. Students, in other words, deliberately narrowed down their choices of self-access materials regardless of the quantities of other programmes available. They did so because these programmes corresponded most closely to their perceived individual learning needs (the mastery of foreign language

structures) and because they were undoubtedly already familiar with the learning paradigms embodied in them.

qC2. How useful is the computer segment for your language learning needs?

	Year I	Year II
Useful	14%	31%
Often useful	57%	62%
Rarely useful	29%	8%
Useless	-	

The Internet/WWW approval rate, however, was even higher (qC11+12) and increased dramatically from Year I to Year II. Initially, students complained that 'it is difficult to find a useful web' (G1-9) or that 'I am not so familiar of the ways to use it' (G1-6). Once these problems were overcome and students developed a focus of interest, the advantages of the medium came into full play. Students became increasingly 'self-directed' and saw the Internet as the major avenue to 'independence' (rather than the possibility to choose freely among non-electronic learning material): ' I try to visit some homepages (in German) and that really helps!' (G2-6), 'I can get up-to-date information about current affairs in Europe and a wider range of sources because print sources in Hong Kong are usually confined to the most popular few and are usually with an Anglo-Saxon bias' (G2-7).

qC11. How useful have you found the Internet/WWW?

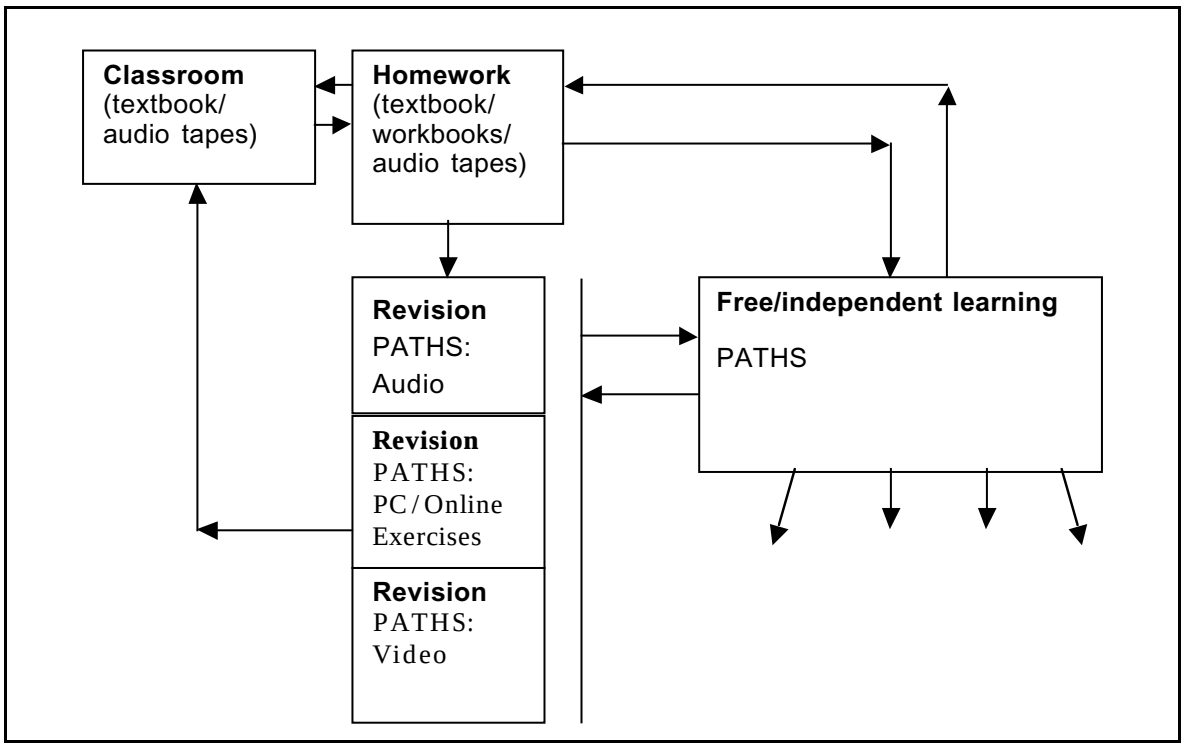
	Year I	Year II
Useful	21%	77%
Occasionally useful	79%	23%
Useless	-	-
No answer	-	-

In summary, among all resources available for self-access learning, electronic media came out first in our survey. While there was a demand for listening/speaking exercises via audio tapes in the first year of studies, and students used videos for both language learning and content interest, it was 'the computer' which they favoured over all other media formats. The increase in Study Path references to print material, which was one of the foci of this project, did not change these preferences. Among electronic media, the Internet/WWW was the clear favorite, although the rationale behind that remains somewhat obscure. Internet and WWW, after all, are multifunctional and can (and are) used for purposes which go beyond 'learning' in the narrow sense. Beyond that, there were no observable preferences for certain segments of the data base. Exactly because there are different individual learning styles, this was to be expected. The data base does in fact cater to all learning needs, as far as we could observe. But the overall learning needs were defined primarily by the pressures of the curriculum and previous (secondary school) learning experiences rather than by the desire to become 'independent'.

Data Base Access Routines

The peer interviews showed that most students now routinely structured their learning by checking the data base first. The Study Paths were firmly integrated into the overall learning within the course. The system acts as a bridge between the highly structured demands of the language classroom and, if time permits, individual choices according to interest. The starting point typically is a revision of classroom topics. The interviews also confirmed that electronic media are generally preferred for self-access learning.

Figure 8: Integration of the data base into the learning process



I usually do my workbook [exercises] first. Then I try to find some materials to do my revisions in the SALU. […] I get the information about the materials from the [Study Paths]. I follow the instructions. … I usually do the exercises on the PC. Sometimes I may find some more exercises from the books, but I do not work on them that often. Sometimes I watch videos too. (K1)

I first pick the "Themen neu" cassette and do some "Sprechübungen". That's usually what I do.

(Why?)

Because I use the "Themen neu" textbook, and so I would think that to use the "Themen neu" cassettes is just the most suitable thing for me to do. I don't have to experiment. […] Then I would try to go to the homepage of the German stream and then I would just look at some of the "Zeitung" [online newspapers] to see what I can understand.' (H1)

Video – that's what I sometimes do. I would watch first and then go to the text[book]. [The video] "Anna, Schmidt & Oskar", that's what I like most because there is much conversation going on […]

(What do you think about the exercise books on the SALU shelves?)

> Usually I do not use them […] unless one of the books is highly recommended by my classmates. […] But for audio practices, I can really know how I speak, how I pronounce the words, and that will make me know how much I'm gaining, how much I'm learning.
>
> (You can't get this from exercise books?)
>
> Well – I can – but then, exercise books are usually boring when compared to audio and videos.' (H2)

The data base itself was considered helpful by most, not least because it acts as a springboard to more, extended and/or even subject-unrelated material. Predictably, though, 'analytical' learners relied on it more regularly than 'concrete' learners:

> The Study Path helps me a lot to master the German grammar. Sometimes I can learn some new grammar, too. However, I do not pay much attention to any other materials. […] Actually, I only do my revisions, "Wiederholung". I do not spend much time to learn something new.' (K2)
>
> It's good for my revisions. Once I did all the software exercises of a chapter and I can learn a lot. I can find what I want to work on there.' (K3)
>
> Actually, I use everything [in the SALU]. I prefer listening to the audio tapes as my revisions. […] I can do some other things while I'm listening to the tapes. I'm trying to get used to the language. […] Surely, I know how to use the Study Path, but I don't want to use it. I think the materials suggested on the web site would definitely help me – but I won't stick to the Study Path anyway. (N1)

Students invariably felt that the freedom to be 'self-directed' was enhanced by the data base, and that the Study Path system and its possible choices was a training ground for later 'independent' decisions. Ultimately, however, the freedom to learn at one's own pace and interest is severely restricted by the daily pressures of the course curriculum. Under the given circumstances, there is a contradiction between the lofty goal of 'learner autonomy' and the reality of stressful undergraduate learning, which students clearly notice. Time and again, this showed up in interviews and informal comments. Especially in peer interviews, the opportunity to learn independently was often interpreted as just one more demand placed on students by teachers – while these same teachers can do little to reduce the workload within the system as a whole:

> Usually, like on normal school days, I really don't have the time to try different things and see if this one suits me or if that one is too difficult. I just don't have that kind of time. (H2)
>
> The Study Path has provided a lot of possibilities for us but it is impossible for me to finish all […] I am too busy with my studies and I rarely have the time […] I do not have enough time. […] I have time to do my revision, but I hardly have time to learn something new. (N2)
>
> The problem is – after three hours [of German] and other lessons, usually I'm exhausted. And the SALU closes at six on normal school days, so that all I could have is just a few hours before the SALU closes, and that's why I didn't do much exploration. (H6)

In this situation, easy and fast manageability of the data base and its recommended materials becomes crucial. This may be a major reason for the preference of electronic (except CD-ROMs). But the dependency on technology can also become an irritating factor:

> Sometimes the speed of the Internet is quite slow and it wastes too much time for me to check the website. I would rather spend my time to search the materials on my own than accessing the Net. (N2)
>
> Now we have several pages for one Path. It takes time to load the pages, and sometimes the speed of the Net is quite slow. […] I like the recent layout but the problem is the speed of the Net. This page can work pretty well on my PC at home, but in SALU it is just too slow! (N3)
>
> The speed of the PC could be a bit faster. […] The PCs are o.k. They are just a bit slow sometimes. (K3)

Conclusions: Optimised Packaging of the Product(s)

As Figure 8 (above) shows, work with the data base and the self-study materials it points to, really forms part of a loop that starts and ends with the classroom. Students may move in a 'small loop' of immediate class revision, or venture out into 'independent', seemingly classroom-unrelated activities. Ultimately, however, all activities typically refer back to the their core task, the fulfillment of course requirements. For the students, 'learner independence' is not an end in itself:

> [Do you feel that your time is well-spent in the SALU?]
>
> Sometimes, and sometimes not. When I feel that I have spent my time in a very meaningful way […], that is when, let's say, Frau Ng asks me some question and I can answer in class and – that's a kind of satisfaction you get after a lot of hard work, you know, and you can tell that you are making progress – when you can catch the words in the audio cassettes […] or you can actually understand what your teachers are saying. (So it's very closely related to what happens in class?) Right. I would say so. (H7)

Too much 'independence' is not necessarily welcome, as the same student noted:

> I just want one thing or maybe two things (for self-access study). And then [the Study Paths] give me a whole lot! (But that is meant to give you freedom of choice.) [laughs] - Yes. But then – I don't really know where to start if you give me that much freedom. Because I'm raised, after all, in the Hong Kong education system! (H7)

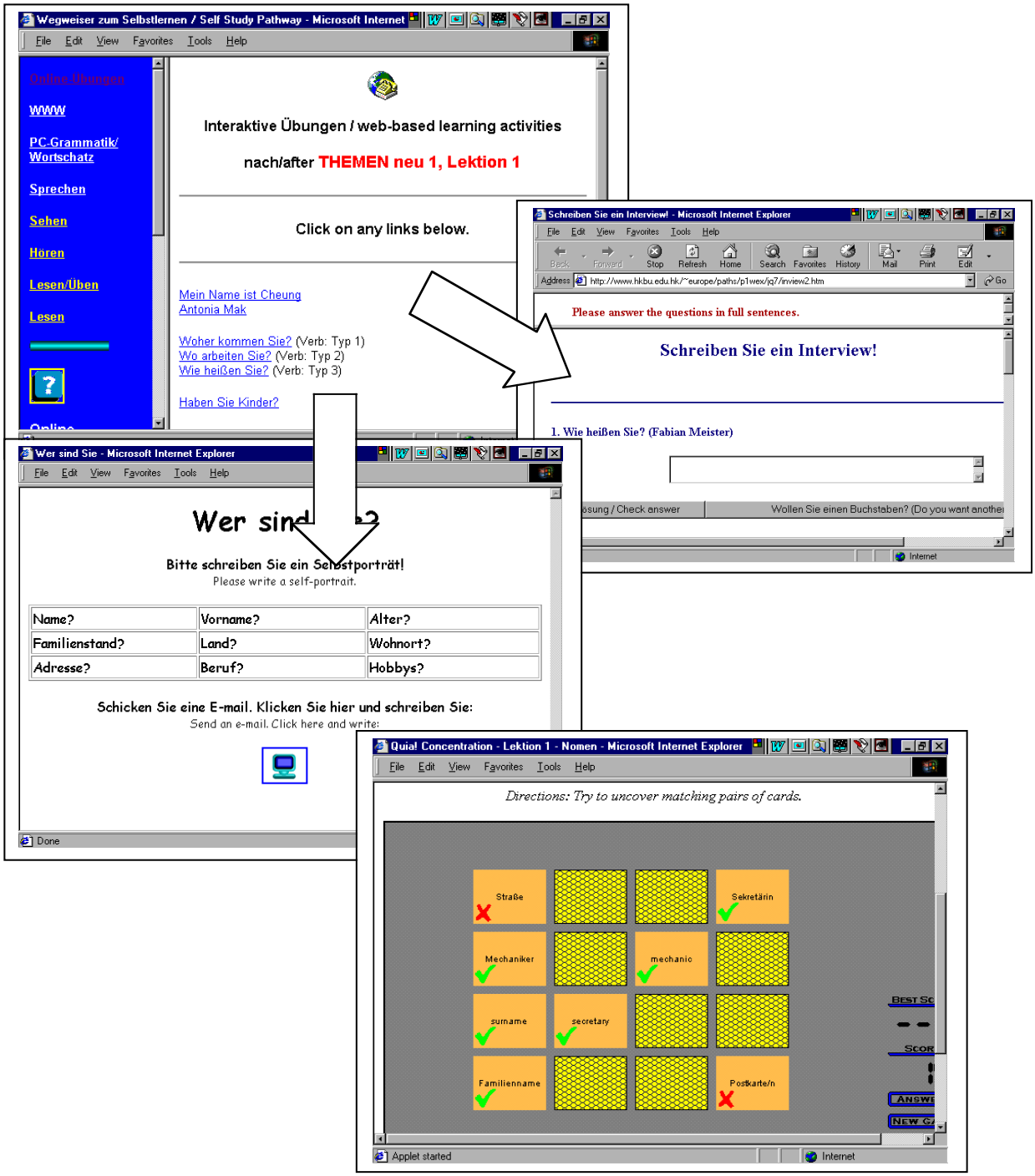
This, without doubt, is the comment of a first-year student. Our data show that it took several months before students actually felt confident enough to make their own choices in the data base - through a process of trial and error, which was made easier by the pre-structuring of self-access material. In that process, students gradually became aware of their own preferred learning modality. The reference system now is large enough to offer starting points for all learner types. By the onset of Year II, insecurities have largely disappeared, as satisfaction rates both with the system and the materials indicate. However, students frequently - and rightly - pointed out that guidance during the first steps to 'independence' is desirable. Further developments of the Study Path system, therefore, need to focus even more on the 'human factor' of 1:1 counseling rather than quantitative expansions of the reference lists. Particularly important seems to be an extended induction phase at the onset of the course, possibly in three stages: (a) directed self-access with a teacher / tutor, (b) semi-directed work with a decreasing amount of teacher recommendations, (c) fully self-directed work with a teacher / tutor merely 'on standby'.

At the same time, it became abundantly clear that the 'new' media have become the mainstay of all self-access learning activity (which is not to say that they 'replace' classroom, teachers and, generally, personal interaction). This does not necessarily mean that students learn more or better

(cf. Hess, 1998). But for their sheer convenience, electronic media now more or less replace the 'traditional' learning tools of books, work sheets and other paperbound exercise collections. Within another few years, they will also have replaced video tapes and audio cassettes, whose content can then be 'streamed in' through the Internet. Further enhancements of the data base (and the SALU in general) therefore need not rely on the acquisition of ever more textbooks – but should rather concentrate on transferring 'traditional' exercises to interactive, net-based formats. We have already started this process by authoring our own online exercises ('Online Übungen', see e.g. http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/paths/p1int.htm and Figure 9 below). Via the data base, we also created links between the classroom syllabus and online dictionaries, online grammars, net-based speech synthesizers (for pronunciation training) and a host of other tools (cf. http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/paths/p1.htm). On the more advanced level (Year II), Study Paths now point to original German-language web sites which, in turn, are linked back to social action in the course through study tasks and e-mailing to teachers (cf. e.g. http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~europe/paths/p25wex/p25hari/haribo.htm). Ultimately, all these tools and activities should be 'seamlessly integrated' on the web so as to facilitate students' learning and make it more 'efficient' in their own definition. 'The web' is, in fact, already on the way to becoming an integrated part of the overall learning process, although further experimentation about optimal usage is undoubtedly needed.

All of this does not preclude 'learner independence', although it appeared to be highly structured if not manipulative to some. On the contrary, as our experiences show, our 'consumer-friendly' data base helps students to develop 'self-direction' gradually and therefore – effectively.

Figure 9: Web-based, interactive language exercises/games (Lesson 1/Beginners)



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