



DIGIDAZU - A PORTAL FOR LEARNING THE GERMAN LANGUAGE IN A BUSINESS DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Magdalena Duvnjak,
Jovan Travica,
Katarina Nasradin,
Maja Rončević*

University Singidunum,
Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract:

In the digital age, the age of using smartphones and the Internet in learning and acquiring foreign languages, the digidaZu application represents another tool for a completely new and creative way of learning German. Along with other tools such as Hello Talk, Duolingo, WordUp, Kahoot, and the Easy German language learning channel, this platform does not represent a complete innovation. On the other hand, what sets this application apart from others is that the language it teaches is the language of profession, i.e. Business German. As an example, exercises are tailored to the language of the office (scheduling appointments, ordering goods, entering data into Excel spreadsheets, business phone calls, codes, office supplies...). The research was conducted to explore students' attitudes towards this very useful portal, what its advantages and disadvantages are and what could be improved and upgraded on this platform, as its development is still ongoing.

Keywords:

Learning German, English for Specific Purposes, Business German Language, Digital Environment.

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has brought about significant changes, both in the business environment and in everyday life. The use of mobile phones has completely transformed our way of life and brought with it many good and bad habits. As an advantage, we can highlight the possibility of learning anywhere and at any time, and the availability of learning materials. On the other hand, as a disadvantage, students' attention is reduced due to the constant influx of information. Students become distracted and are unable to follow the course of the lesson for a long time, and this presents a problem at all ages. In the business world, the situation is the same. Everything is being digitized, and someone who does not know how to handle online tools would not have great chances of developing a career.

DigidaZu is a platform that is applicable on mobile phones as well as on other devices (tablets, laptops, computers). At any time and in any place, students have the opportunity to learn new words and expressions and develop their German language skills. According to Krželj and Hartweger, the implementation of mobile learning greatly facilitates the learning of the German language among young people [1:97].

Correspondence:

Maja Rončević

e-mail:

mroncevic@singidunum.ac.rs



The emphasis here is on listening (Hörverstehen), reading comprehension (Leseverstehen), completing words, connecting content, learning through images, and speaking skills, while writing longer texts is not the main focus of the DigidazU application. If a student wants to focus more on oral communication or wants to find a conversation partner in German, French, or Spanish, for example, then the Hello Talk application would be more suitable for them, as described in the paper of Maenza and Gajić [2:642-643].

Our interviewees are students of the Faculty of Business, the Faculty of Computer Science and Informatics, as well as the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management at Singidunum University. Each of the mentioned faculties has a completely different language for specific purposes. The platform offers exercises that are oriented towards topics related to various professions. We will only mention some examples - the language of pharmacy, language in the office, in a nursing home. The common thing in all exercises is learning about German business etiquette and cultural specificities. In the global world, cultural habits become less pronounced, but again, if a student were to work in a German, Austrian, or Swiss business environment in the future, it would take them time to adapt to some of the habits and specificities of the above-mentioned environments. The platform highlights the Austrian way of business communication the most, as the project originated from there. According to Ivić, English should be taught as a language for specific purposes from the elementary level [3:52-53]. The same should be the case for each foreign language. Since language is infinite, it should be studied with guidelines and directions from the very beginning. According to Jelovčić, the subjects' attitudes show that each student should speak at least two foreign languages [4:49] - English and another foreign language. With language learning, the culture of the target people is also studied. The authors Didović Baranac, Falkoni-Mjehović, Vidak dedicated their work to the attitudes of the subjects in the language of the profession. They compared attitudes towards learning German, English, and Spanish in a business environment [5:16-17]. Here we will highlight the results related to learning German. A large number of respondents state that (Business) German is difficult to learn and that it is best learned by staying in the German-speaking area.

Enabling people to enter the world of business everyday life that is digitalized was the initial guiding idea for the creation of the digidazU platform in January 2020. Learning German is simultaneously connected to acquiring basic digital competencies. This enables users of this platform to participate and integrate faster into social life and the labour market. [6]

Let us take a brief look at the digidazU platform itself. DigidazU comes from the words "digi," which refers to digital, "DaZ," which stands for German as a second or foreign language, and "Zu," which shows that it is a combination of both.

According to source [7], the project was created by an integration centre in Vienna and aimed primarily to help foreigners integrate into the business world. From this idea, the platform became available not only to foreigners but also to anyone who wants to learn business German. Enabling people to enter the world of digitalized business everyday life was the guiding idea for the creation of this platform in January 2020.

From source [8], we learnt that even those who speak German well can sometimes find it difficult to use it in a business environment. Not because of a lack of knowledge of the language, but because of insufficient proficiency in the tools that this platform tries to bring closer to the average user.

From all the above, we conclude that this research is useful and will open up a series of ideas and questions for further research on the same topic.

2. RESEARCH AIMS AND HYPOTHESIS

As we have already stated, the aim of the research was to examine the attitudes of students from non-linguistic faculties towards the advantages and disadvantages of the digidazU platform. There are a few hypotheses we set:

- It is assumed that the most demanding exercise will be listening due to the speed of speech and the subject of conversation.
- It is assumed that the application is useful for students preparing for the future business environment.
- It is assumed that the student has enriched their vocabulary with at least six new words/expressions after completing the exercises.



3. PARTICIPANTS

Our participants were students from non-linguistic faculties at Singidunum University, namely the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management. The participants were from all over Serbia, not just from Belgrade. They had prior knowledge of the German language and no one was at a beginner level. We had male and female participants, making our sample diverse and relevant. The research conducted was a qualitative study in the form of a focus group. The focus group consisted of 7 students who had been introduced to the digidazU platform during class and in their free time, and were asked to answer the questions provided in this study. The interviews were conducted anonymously, so participants were encouraged to express their opinions honestly and critically. The authors of this study chose this method of research in order to examine students' attitudes towards the functionality, applicability, and potential shortcomings of the platform in a more intimate and relaxed manner.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Speaking of the first question – whether the exercises follow business trends and whether the acquired knowledge is applicable in practice, all participants gave affirmative answers. Since one of the multiple thematic areas offered by the application was chosen, in our case *Im Büro*, the participants recognize the possibility of applying the acquired knowledge in various business profiles: business secretary, administrator, employee in a tourist agency, etc.

Five participants named exercise number 3 (matching cards with similar meanings) as the most challenging exercise, with the following explanation: S.M: There are many new unknown words, and even the possibility of seeing the correct answer later does not contribute to understanding. Therefore, he believes that sentences should be shorter and simpler, and the option of combining two cards should have the ability to zoom in.

Most participants (5) named exercise 1, the listening exercise, as the easiest, with the explanation that the speech tempo was acceptable because they often listen to audio exercises in regular classes that they only partially understand due to inadequate speech speed.

It is important to note that the topic of the listening exercise is scheduling appointments, changing and rescheduling appointments, and several dates within a short time frame. Hence, there is a need for greater concentration. A.O made an interesting observation that both female voices leading the dialogue have a similar tone, which confuses the listener at some point, so it would be more effective if they were different voices or even better, male and female voices.

When asked to name a few new words, three participants listed five or more words they remembered. It is noticeable that they are almost the same words or phrases. These are: *die Bürokauffrau; der Marker, abtippen, einen Termin verschieben, absagen*. In addition to these, A.O mentions phrases such as *Buchhaltung machen; Leider ist alles voll*; S.M also mentions nouns that are the subject of the 4th exercise: *der Notizblock; der Stempel, die Klammermaschine*. M.I and V.D emphasize the need to repeat the exercise several times to memorize the nouns related to office material.

As positive aspects of the exercises, half of the participants mention the following:

1. Variety (pictures, animations, audio, video)
2. Symbols that lead to additional exercises or situations typical in a business environment with a single click
3. Easy to repeat and check mistakes
4. Exercise 4 (learning vocabulary using pictures) is very useful and simple to learn vocabulary, especially since the singular and plural forms are given for nouns, and the infinitive and one example sentence.
5. Applicability in practice
6. Orientation towards communication in a business environment

The participants do not name any characteristic as exclusively negative regarding the exercises given, but they recognize room for improvement. Therefore, it is more about suggestions for improving learning efficiency.

Before Exercise 2 (Complete the text with the given suggestions), there should be an explanation/rule presented through an example sentence when using a specific preposition. (A.O notes that she had a dilemma when to use the preposition "bei" and when to use "vor".)



In Exercise 4, in addition to the noun, there should be the possibility of an audio recording (for example, via a speaker symbol) to be able to hear the correct pronunciation of a particular word because there are many compound words. The ability to see an image, text, and sound contributes to faster the faster acquisition of words.

New fields such as accounting (with specialized terminology), trade, tourism, and hospitality should be introduced. (B.K, V.LJ, A.O)

At the end, we will turn to the set hypotheses and the goal of our research.

- It is assumed that the most demanding exercise will be listening due to the speed of speech and the subject of conversation.

This hypothesis is partially confirmed. Only one respondent, V.LJ, stated that listening was the most challenging, while most respondents stated that the exercise with connecting cards was actually the most challenging.

- It is assumed that the application is useful for students preparing for the future business environment.

All respondents confirmed this hypothesis. They stated that the application is excellent for learning Business German. It should be noted that this platform is still in development, and new topics shall be introduced.

- It is assumed that the student has enriched their vocabulary with at least six new words/expressions after completing the exercises.

This hypothesis was proved wrong, thus we can say that some respondents learnt more than six new words/phrases. It is important to note that several respondents stated that they would need to repeat the new words several more times, which indicates that a new word/phrase is considered learnt only after several repetitions.

5. CONCLUSION

Besides the English language, which is a lingua franca, German language has gained more popularity and importance in the business world. Many German/Austrian/Swiss companies, banks, and corporations have opened up in our area. The majority of investments in the Republic of Serbia in recent years come from Germany. Therefore, Germany is undoubtedly the biggest investor, with many of our people employed in their factories, and the interest continues to grow.

On the other hand, many people from our country are leaving to live and work in some of German-speaking countries. Hence, in recent times, the necessity of knowing the German language seems more crucial than ever alongside English.

Research on a focus group showed that digidazU platform represents an excellent way to learn business German language and integrate into the business world and society. Learning the language for various jobs and acquiring digital competencies is the main advantage of this platform. Training language and digital competencies simultaneously in an authentic context is what digidaZu allows.

It is essential to mention that the number of participants in this research was relatively small, and exercises were taken from one of several thematic areas, specifically the one related to the office (Im Büro). Through the research results, several very specific constructive suggestions for improving interactive exercises in this thematic area were obtained. Additionally, in one of the next research, the language of pharmacy, gastronomy, or another area could be taken as a sample. In this sense, this research opens the door for future research focused on the German language in business.

6. APPENDIX – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Does the topic of the assigned exercises follow business trends?
2. Is the acquired knowledge applicable in practice?
3. Which of the assigned exercises was the most challenging and why?
4. Which of the assigned exercises was the easiest?
5. Can you name a few new nouns/verbs/expressions/phrases that you memorized while doing the assigned exercises?
6. What do you see as the positive and negative aspects of these exercises?
7. Is the speaking speed in the listening exercises adjusted to their understanding?



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