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Review of "studio d A1" and "Lagune 1" from a Pronunciation Perspective

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1 Introduction

Pronunciation training is an essential element of foreign language learning, supporting not only the acquisition of reading and writing skills, but especially the learner's comprehension and fluency in oral communication. Nevertheless, phonetic materials devoted to pronunciation training continue to receive less attention (Hirschfeld, 2003), and there is a need for improved training methods and materials. This review examines how pronunciation materials have been incorporated into two recent German as a Foreign Language (GFL) textbooks and how they can also contribute to the acquisition of other language skills.

The first of these textbooks, *studio d A1*, integrates pronunciation materials in sequences of oral activities, which may be oriented towards the learning of vocabulary, grammar or other skills, with the main goal of facilitating the regular and authentic use of phonetics in class. This textbook is designed to be first-language (L1) neutral and is intended for adult learners without any prior knowledge of German. The second textbook, *Lagune 1*, places pronunciation training into a special section, called "Fokus Sprechen" (focus on speaking), which appears in regular intervals throughout the textbook. Despite allowing the teacher to choose and integrate pronunciation materials in class according to schedule and theme, this textbook trains pronunciation separately from other skills. *Lagune 1* is also developed for adult beginners in German with different mother tongues. Similar to *studio d A1*, it is oriented towards communicative language learning, allowing for the acquisition of all four so-called basic skills, and covers the language level A1 as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001).

This review will develop and apply criteria for the evaluation of pronunciation exercises in both textbooks. In summarizing the results, it will also comment on the potential of the approaches adopted by the books as well as how these approaches are realised.

2   Criteria for evaluating pronunciation training in textbooks

Recent research literature offers various methods for comprehensively reviewing pronunciation materials in textbooks (e.g. Panušová, 2007; Dieling & Hirschfeld, 2000). In this review, a selection of criteria from the method of analysis suggested by Dieling and Hirschfeld (2000) will be utilized. Specifically, it will focus on the following two points**:** First, it will determine to what extent textbooks provide creative and communicative exercises, enabling the learner to apply the second language (L2) pronunciation beyond the accuracy-focused contexts in which it was initially learnt (Bygate, 2005). Second, a wider view will be taken by concentrating on the learning process and its sequencing principles (Gehrmann, 1999). Specifically, the progression from listening to articulation training with increasing degrees of difficulty will be examined in a series of exercises. In addition, the textbook's overall progression of pronunciation training should present comprehensive coverage of both segmental and suprasegmental components in a gradual and logically organised manner. Finally, since the quality of the pronunciation exercises and their interplay with other components of the textbook are decisive for the successful application of these exercises in class, the review will consider the potential of each textbook for successful classroom use, using results of the evaluation based on the aforementioned criteria. It will summarise and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the reviewed textbooks with view to the development of pronunciation skills.

3   Textbook analysis

3.1   Criterion one: creative and communicative design of pronunciation exercises

Since L1 listening and articulation patterns prove to be highly automated and are very likely to be transferred to the L2 (Jones, 2005), the acquisition of a new phonetic system requires continuous effort and practice (Fiukowski, 2004). Therefore, the successful acquisition of the L2 pronunciation requires motivating and creative tasks and exercises of varied styles. This can be achieved by efficiently integrating pronunciation materials into sequences of oral activities which also focus on other aspects of language learning, such as grammar, vocabulary, or intercultural communication skills. The realisation of these principles will now be examined in the GFL textbooks *studio d A1* and *Lagune 1*.

3.1.1   Creative and communicative design of pronunciation exercises in studio d A1

studio d A1 has made an obvious effort to relate pronunciation training to vocabulary and grammar learning. Both listening and articulation patterns are usually practiced with structures that reflect the thematic context and pragmatic learning objectives of the individual textbook units. In Unit 2, for example, the training of word accent takes place through the use of typical classroom items congruent with the overall topic of the unit, "Im Sprachkurs" (In the Language Course; p. 31: Exercise 6). Furthermore, most exercises are embedded within communicative contexts, allowing for meaningful practice, and only few training units present lists of words in a monotonous fashion (e.g. p. 60: Exercise 3 which focuses on the ch-sounds).

Therefore, the integration of phonetic training in lexically and grammatically oriented materials not only offers much potential for creative and motivating exercises, but also facilitates the application of the target elements in thematically relevant contexts. In this way, the learner becomes acquainted with the use of the L2 in everyday situations, and is trained towards the automated processing of different language elements.

These positive aspects notwithstanding, it must however be said that almost half of the exercises in this textbook are designed with a similar reproductive pattern, asking the student to listen and repeat certain materials. Most of the other phonetic exercises do combine production and reproduction by adding cognitive tasks such as selecting, marking, or comparing. In contrast to the textbook, the teachers' handbook (Bettermann & Werner, 2005) explicitly points to the need for

teachers to change suprasegmental features and include games, gestures and body movements, in order to increase the students' motivation (e.g. p. 61: Exercise 7). As much repetition is needed to gain familiarity with new phonetic components, these suggestions, found in the handbook, would be better off incorporated into the textbook itself in order to facilitate the use of the pronunciation materials in class. Otherwise, monotony and a loss of motivation may set in and negatively influence learners' acceptance of the pronunciation practice. Hence, it would appear that *studio d A1* has not fully exploited the potential of pronunciation materials design to provide creative and diverse exercises, though it does provide a sound basis.

3.1.2 *Creative and communicative design of pronunciation exercises in* Lagune 1

Lagune 1 is structured according to a set pattern and is divided into 6 thematic units. Each of these units, in turn, consists of 5 separate sections, titled "Structures", "Reading", "Listening", "Speaking" and "Writing." Pronunciation exercises are embedded only in some of the speaking sections, resulting in their separation from other language areas and skills.

Unfortunately, most pronunciation sequences start with the 'Listen and Repeat' pattern, presenting lists of words with specific sounds or mini-sentences (e.g. p. 68: Exercise 1 which focuses on short versus long vowels). There are only a few exercises which do not consist of pattern drills, employing instead more cognitive tasks such as marking, organizing or varying given structures (e.g. p. 92: Exercise 1 – Marking the word accent and sentence stress). Moreover, some units present nonsensical sentences with hardly any communicative value to the learner (e.g. "Saras Katze rasiert siebzig Tischler" or, in English, "Sara's cat shaves seventy cabinetmakers", p. 44: Exercise 3). Consequently, most phonetic exercises are based on repetitive-reproductive patterns with rather limited opportunities for creative and varied learning based on authentic situations.

With respect to the integration of other language areas and skills, there are further exercises in the speaking sections, focusing mostly on automating grammar structures and developing fluency, which will allow learners to apply the target sound or intonation patterns more intensively. A positive example can be found in the speaking section 19 for practicing the pronunciation of the ch-sounds. It also asks learners to look up other familiar words containing these sounds in order to construct new sentences (p. 94: Exercise 7). *Lagune 1* only partially incorporates the vocabulary of the corresponding thematic unit into the pronunciation training. For example, in section 9 (pp. 44-47; see Figure 1), training in sibilants is conducted partly using vocabulary from the section (on food and beverages), and partly with words not belonging to the thematic framework.

Fig. 1: Practice of sibilants with word lists in *Lagune 1* (p. 44)

Therefore, although the word lists in the pronunciation exercises are partially connected to other learning materials in *Lagune 1*, the communicative value and motivational level for the learner may be comparatively low, as the exercise design does not encourage much motivation or creativity.

Table 1 is a summary of the comparison of both textbooks with regard to the creative and communicative design of the pronunciation exercises.

	studio d A1	*Lagune 1*
Integration with other learning objectives of the unit (e.g. grammar)	✓	Partially present but requires greater integration
Communicative contexts	✓ (mostly)	Few instances present due to high number of pattern drills and some nonsensical constructions
Varying and creative exercise design enriched with productive components	Positive attempts discernable but reduction of repetitive structures desirable	Exercise design mostly repetitive and reproductive

Table 1: Comparison of the creative and communicative design of pronunciation exercises

3.2   Criterion two: progression and sequence of pronunciation exercises

In heterogeneous groups of learners and in non-L1 specific textbooks, the selection and sequencing of pronunciation components and the extent of practice provided could prove to be a challenge for teachers and textbook authors. Generally, the preferred methods are presenting phonetic materials either in an integrated form in each textbook unit, or attending to selected elements at intervals after a certain number of units.

Hence, an interesting question to ask is which approach would be better suited to supporting a gradual and logical progression of phonetic elements, both within a sequence of exercises and in the context of the overall textbook. Although a definite answer to this question may not be possible, some conclusions may be drawn from the analysis of *studio d A1* and *Lagune 1*.

3.2.1   Progression and sequence of pronunciation exercises studio d A1

With regard to sequencing, *studio d A1* generally adheres to the principle of basing productive tasks on receptive ones, and of increasing the degree of difficulty systematically. An example of such a sequence is the training of the opposition pair [f] versus [v] (p. 100: Exercises 2-4). First, the two sounds are introduced with the help of IPA symbols and example words, raising the learner's awareness of the specific contrast. Subsequently, the textbook presents a discriminative listening exercise, followed by a first attempt at pronunciation. Finally, the phoneme-grapheme-relations of these two sounds are practiced by means of examples that the learners look for themselves. As the pronunciation exercises generally use word and sentence examples that are often included in other exercises, the learner is given the opportunity to practice the new articulation mode in more pragmatic contexts, thus increasing the level of automated application.

With regard to the overall progression of the pronunciation components, *studio d A1* starts at the suprasegmental level by familiarizing the learner with the 'melody' of the German language. Subsequently, each textbook unit provides a different focus at the segmental level organised according to sound classes, e.g. plosives, nasals, vocal endings. Thus, the textbook exhibits a systematic progression covering both typical articulation and intonation problems for learners of German. The suitability of the selection and sequence of sound classes cannot be ascertained in general terms, since the pronunciation difficulties of learners are largely dependent on their mother tongues.

Fig. 2: Sequence of pronunciation exercises in *studio d A1* (p. 100)

3.2.2 *Progression and sequence of pronunciation exercises* Lagune 1

In determining the sequencing of individual pronunciation units, the textbook *Lagune 1* also bases productive exercises on receptive ones, increasing the difficulty level successively by proceeding from simpler exercises to more demanding ones, such as those which ask the student for additional cognitive actions (e.g. p. 44: Exercises 1-3, which focus on the articulation of sibilants, beginning with the reception and repetition of word lists, and ending with sentence construction). Unfortunately, most exercises do not go beyond reproduction and imitation, resulting in limited sequences and an impression of being dropped into the speaking section without establishing a strong link to other exercises. Therefore, *Lagune 1* often does not offer sufficient practice materials for the attainment of the desired level of automation without further adaptation of the exercises by the teacher according to the pronunciation objectives.

The arrangement and sequencing of pronunciation components in *Lagune 1* is somewhat difficult to follow. Whereas the first two speaking sections practice only one pronunciation element each (the German alphabet, sibilants), the third section offers four elements (short vs. long vowels, st vs. sp, ü-sounds, sentence stress), the fourth two (word accent, ch-sounds), the fifth does not practice any pronunciation element explicitly, and the last section again offers one element (short vs. long vowels). Despite the fact that both segmental and suprasegmental aspects are covered in the textbook, the selection of phonetic components is somewhat puzzling and at a rather superficial level. In terms of vowels, for example, the textbook focuses mainly on the difference between short and long vowels, while the only separately practiced vowels are the *ü*-sounds [ʏ, y]. The question arises as to why the textbook authors have included only one group of rounded front vowels, since the German language has another group, namely the *ö*-sounds [œ, ø], which typically cause similar problems as the *ü*-sounds. The arrangement and selection of the phonetic components in *Lagune 1* is unfortunately not fully clear.

Table 2 compares both textbooks in terms of the progression and sequence of pronunciation exercises.

	studio d A1	*Lagune 1*
Guidelines for pronunciation sequencing	✓	Basic guidelines are followed, though sequences are often limited
Systematic coverage of segmental and suprasegmental levels	✓	Coverage of both levels but arrangement somewhat unclear
Balanced selection of phonetic elements (e.g. vowels vs. consonants)	✓ (mostly)	Different sound classes are considered, though this seems not entirely complete

Table 2: Comparison of the progression and sequence of pronunciation exercises

4   Evaluation: strengths and weaknesses

Insofar as the creative and communicative design of exercises is concerned, *studio d A1* seems to be better able to facilitate the adaptation of the pronunciation training to other learning materials of the concerned textbook unit. Therefore, the pronunciation exercises not only provide communicative value, but are also characterised by creative design. However, despite these positive attributes, the textbook *studio d A1* contains a fairly high number of exercises with a similar reproductive structure which could be remedied by paying more attention to the variation of the types of exercises, as suggested by researchers (e.g. Dieling & Hirschfeld, 2000; Cauneau, 1992; Klimov, 1995).

The review of *Lagune 1* also reveals certain gaps in pronunciation training, since the textbook does not fully exploit the potential of the chosen separation-of-skills approach. The textbook evokes the impression that local separation of the pronunciation training from other skill and language areas increases the likelihood it will be estranged from the other learning objectives of the units concerned as well. Moreover, repetitive exercise patterns and non-communicative constructions, found to a greater extent in *Lagune 1*, might negatively impact the effectiveness of the textbook's pronunciation training and the acquisition of other language skills such as listening comprehension and oral fluency.

In terms of the progression and sequencing of exercises, the approaches taken by both textbooks can, in theory, offer their respective advantages. However, in adopting the integrated approach, *studio d A1* may have found a more successful strategy with regard to both the progression of the pronunciation materials within a learning section and the general progression of pronunciation training in the entire textbook. Though adhering to similar principles in the progression within a learning section, the separation approach taken in *Lagune 1* reveals certain deficits in terms of the overall arrangement of pronunciation components in the thematic units. Both the selection and the sequencing of phonetic elements can be improved, as the pronunciation training could be linked more obviously to the other learning sections.

A suggestion for the use of *Lagune 1* in class could hence be to integrate the pronunciation exercises in the speaking section with other sections such as listening comprehension. This would, of course, require effort on the part of the teacher, who would need to establish a stronger link between the pronunciation elements and the other materials.

5   Conclusion

The evaluation of the two GFL textbooks reviewed in this article seems to reveal that there is still a discernible gap between the potential for providing creative and communicative pronunciation exercises and the actual realisation of this potential in terms of the design and arrangement of pronunciation exercises in both books. Nevertheless, the analysis would seem to indicate that *studio d A1* may prove to be more successful at providing communicative pronunciation exercises in a logical progression. Since *Lagune 1* only partially integrates pronunciation training with the

other learning objectives of each unit, it not only diminishes the efficiency of the pronunciation training, but could also negatively impact the use of the included phonetic exercises in class. It would be desirable for textbook authors to develop ways to combine pronunciation training with other areas such as grammar or vocabulary, even if pronunciation is only practiced in separate or specific sections of the textbook. In the same vein, it is hoped that recent improvements made to pronunciation training in textbooks will continue and intensify through the increased application of findings from relevant research.

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