

# SEARCH 'A2, LIEBESLEBEN, 500 WORDS'. TEACHERS' USE OF AI-BASED TOOLS FOR THE GFL READING CLASS

Gegenstand des Beitrags ist der Leseunterricht in der Fremdsprache und die Rolle von KI-basierten Werkzeugen für Lehrpersonen. Der Fokus liegt auf einer Textsuche für authentische, niveaugerechte Lesetexte, besprochen werden zudem weitere KI-basierte Werkzeuge wie Textanalyse und Bilderzeugung. Diskutiert wird, wie Lehrpersonen diese Tools erfolgreich für die Vermittlung von Lesekompetenz in Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF) einsetzen können. Die im Projekt „LATILL – Level-Adequate Texts in Language Learning“ (2022-2025) entwickelte Textsuche ist auf einer Online-Plattform für Lehrpersonen verfügbar. Ein didaktisches Beispiel veranschaulicht den Einsatz der genannten Tools zur Vorbereitung von handlungsorientiertem, binnendifferenziertem DaF-Leseunterricht. Ziel des Beitrags ist, Unterrichtenden Anregungen dafür zu geben, wie KI-basierte Werkzeuge zur Planung und Vorbereitung von fremdsprachlichem Leseunterricht eingesetzt werden können.

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### Teaching Reading in German as a Foreign Language (GFL)

Without question, the reading literacy of learners, and therefore the teaching of reading competencies, is important not only in the first language but also in a foreign language. In this article, thoughts about the teaching of reading in GFL are presented, discussing the action-oriented teaching approach and other didactic aspects. Subsequently, the LATILL (Level-Adequate Texts in Language Learning) project and its main ideas are introduced, before presenting an example of how to prepare an authentic reading text with the use of AI-based tools.

A teacher can influence learners' successful acquisition of reading literacy by offering a foreign language reading class that is action-oriented and internally differentiated. The action-oriented approach, as it is described in the CEFR (Trim et al., 2001) and CEFR Companion Volume (North et al., 2018), is associated with a focus on learners as users of

language and as social agents. This results in learner-oriented, task-based language teaching and learning, enabling learners to use the foreign language for their purposes within the "defined mission" (North, 2023, p. 8).

Equally important is the teaching principle of internal differentiation: The term covers all didactical measures that allow teachers to deal with the individual differences between learners (Buck & Hensch, 2023). As school classes with heterogeneous groups of learners are the norm, it is important to offer every learner an opportunity to acquire reading literacy. Because reading in a foreign language can be frustrating for learners, especially when a text is too difficult and/or contains too many unknown words, the focus is on presenting learning resources and scaffolds on different levels. One solution is to provide level-adequate authentic reading texts. How the LATILL platform enables this will be described later in this article. Foreign language (FL) learners can profit from reading authentic texts that are close to their language level.

One advantage of authentic texts is that they take up current discourses or refer to up-to-date topics. Therefore, it might be easier to motivate learners to read if they know that the text is authentic, perhaps written by a peer in a country where the foreign language is officially used. A further advantage of authentic texts is the richness of context and language. Authentic texts show a greater variation of words and grammatical structures than didactical, artificial texts.

In addition to the action-oriented teaching approach for a GFL reading class, that employs internal differentiation and offers level-adequate texts, learners can be supported in basic reading skills by enhancing their reading fluency. Especially at lower language levels, this can be achieved by fostering word recognition. The aim is to transfer (new) frequent words into the word memory in such a way that they can be recognized 'at a glance' without having to decipher them letter by letter (Rosebrock et al., 2011). Therefore, practicing the accuracy of the necessary decoding skills should also be part of reading instruction.

Another aspect to include in GFL reading instruction concerns higher-order skills: the knowledge and use of reading strategies for dealing with texts in a foreign language. This may include reading strategies such as thinking about the topic before reading (elaborating) or guessing unknown words from context (inferring). If such strategies are lacking when learners are confronted with a new reading text, the reading goal may not be achieved. That is why teachers explain and model reading strategies and provide learners with the opportunity to practice, evaluate, and improve their strategy use (Chamot Uhl & O'Malley, 1994).

In an ideal GFL reading class, learners are suitably equipped with the necessary reading strategies for dealing with an authentic, up-to-date reading text that meets the individual learner's language level. Reading the text is of relevance to the learners and motivates them to act in the FL. A GFL reading class that follows these didactic principles contributes to learners' experience of reading as a worthwhile process that helps develop their reading literacy in a foreign language. The AI-based tools of LATILL take into account all these aspects and didactic principles.

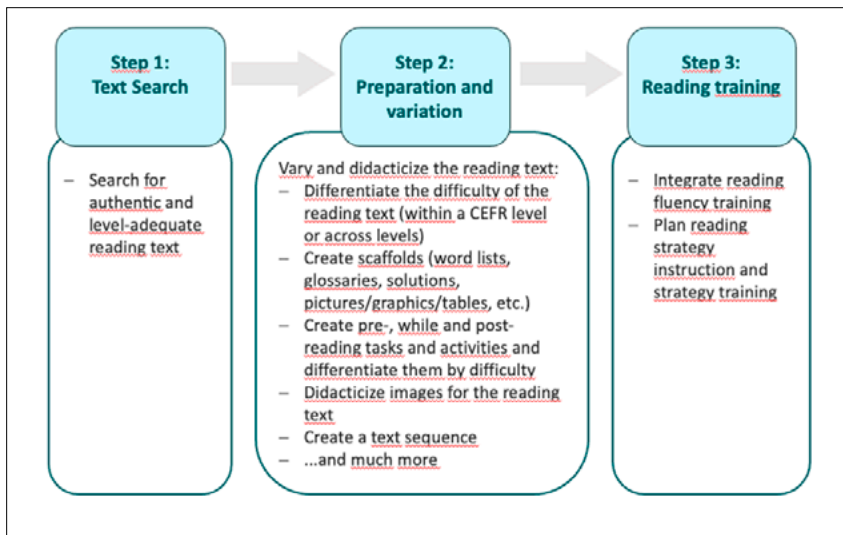
## The LATILL project

The LATILL project aims at supporting teachers in GFL reading instruction, but also in their ability to identify and modify digital resources. Therefore, in the LATILL project, a level-adequate text search for authentic texts in German was created and combined with further AI-based tools. Together with GFL teachers, we tried to find ways how to best use these tools for preparing foreign language reading classes. During the period of a whole school year, thirteen teachers in Ukraine and Spain tested an online platform that was adapted according to their needs and ideas<sup>2</sup>. The main tool is a text search for authentic, level-adequate reading texts accompanied by further tools such as text analysis, image generation, and automatic translation. Furthermore, didactic materials are provided. The LATILL platform has been developed in a joint interdisciplinary effort. The partners are e-learning experts who developed the platform and other tools (GRIAL, University of Salamanca), computational linguists (University of Tübingen) who created the text corpus and developed a CEFR-level classification supported by partners from the ÖSD (Vienna), and GFL (University of Czernivtsi, University of Vienna) who implemented teacher training and tested the platform<sup>3</sup>.

Within the project, the emphasis of the teacher training was on finding new and useful ways of using the platform. This is why the LATILL reading didactics focused on lesson preparations. On the one hand, teachers are experiencing rising expectations concerning their pedagogical, didactical, as well as digital knowledge. On the other hand, these expectations are accompanied by limited time to prepare their teaching due to challenging curricula and large classes and a lot of bureaucracy. Time is therefore a crucial resource in planning and preparing for the upcoming class, an important part of a teacher's work. For this reason, lesson preparation offers a good opportunity to explore how AI-based tools can help teachers to work time-efficiently and yet in the learner's interest to provide better GFL classes.

For the project's teacher training, reading instruction was developed which was conceptualized for and applied in a webinar series (Raveling & Schramm, 2023).

- <sup>1</sup> "LATILL – Level-Adequate Texts in Language Learning", Erasmus+ KA2-Project 2021-1-AT01-KA220-SCH-000029604 <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2021-1-AT01-KA220-SCH-000029604>, project website <https://latill.eu/>. Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, which cannot be held responsible for them.
- <sup>2</sup> A big thank you to all Ukrainian and Spanish teachers who participated in our project during these difficult times.
- <sup>3</sup> The project members are: Universität Wien (AT): Univ.-Prof. Dr. Karen Schramm, Anne Raveling, Daniele Polizio, Associate Researcher: Dr. Martina Kienberger (Universidad de Granada); Universidad de Salamanca/GRIAL (ESP): Dr. Roberto Therón, Dr. Alicia García-Holgado, Dr. Andrea Vázquez-Ingelmo, Nastaran Shoeibi, Ass. R.: Dr. María Mar Soliño Pazó; Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen (DE): Univ.-Prof. Dr. Detmar Meurers, Denise Loefflad, Benedikt Beuttler; Chernivtsi National University Yuriy Fedkovych (UKR): Dr. Tetiana Koropatnitska, Dr. Olena Mudra, Prof. Dr. Bohdana Labinska (former project member); Verein Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch (AT): Dr. Manuela Glaboniat, Dr. Christina Glinik, Melanie Weiss; for more details and further publications see project website <https://latill.eu>.



**Figure 1**  
LATILL reading didactics: Lesson planning and preparation step-by-step

**Figure 2**  
LATILL text search in corpus with keyword, CEFR-level and number of words

**Figure 3**  
LATILL text search offering words marked according to CEFR level classification

The goal of the teacher training was to discuss the topic of GFL reading didactics under certain aspects and to intensify the reflective use of the LATILL platform, especially the level-adequate text search, and further AI-based tools (Raveling & Koropatnitska, 2024). The teachers met during five webinars and additionally during informal group meetings within the international community of practice. This is where they shared their ideas and challenges in using the LATILL platform as well as prepared and used authentic reading texts from the LATILL text corpus in their GFL classes. According to the LATILL reading instructional design, the suggested steps for planning and preparing a GFL reading class with the LATILL platform are the following: [Figure 1].

The first step is to select an authentic, level-adequate reading text. For this purpose, a text search can be conducted looking for a CEFR level and/or keyword(s). The LATILL text search in the corpus ("discover texts") allows not only to choose a CEFR level from "A1" to "B2 and above" but also between one or

all keywords or an exact phrase to be present in the text. It is also possible to apply additional filters concerning text length or filters for grammatical features, e.g. average sentence length or dependent clauses. For even more authentic and up-to-date reading texts, the LATILL platform additionally offers a “web search” that prioritizes didactically relevant sources and shows ten texts per search that are classified in one of the CEFR levels from “A1” to “B2 and above”. After the search, a CEFR level can be chosen so that only level-adequate texts are displayed. It is important to note that texts are not inherently easy or difficult, but the level of difficulty depends on the language learner’s knowledge and skills combined with specific features of a text, e.g., vocabulary used, as well as features external to the text, e.g., reading goal, learning task, time for reading, and many others. Nevertheless, the ‘level’ of a learning resource is a crucial factor for teachers, often determining whether the learning material is chosen and widely requested.

## Tools for teachers

In the following, the planning and preparation of a GFL reading class using AI-based tools will be described. This is of course only one of many possibilities how AI-based tools can be used for preparing an authentic reading text. This example is generalizable to foreign language classes other than GFL, as the didactic principles apply to any instructed learning setting in foreign or second language teaching.

As planning should always start with the learners, a hypothetical but typical GFL class is taken as a starting point, e.g. a third year of secondary school, where the learners are around fifteen years old, and have been learning German as a second foreign language after English for two years at this point. The learners’ language level is expected to reach B1 by the end of the school year, but their language competencies and reading skills vary from the beginnings of A2 to B1.

The appropriate CEFR ‘can do’ descriptors from “overall reading competence” and “reading for information/argument”, which set the broad learning objectives, read in slightly modified form as follows:

### Overall reading competence

- B1 Can read an *online column* on an interest-related subject with a satisfactory level of comprehension.
- A2 Can understand a short, simplified *online column* on a familiar matter that consists of frequent everyday language.

### Reading for information/argument

- B1 Can recognize significant points and understand most information in an *online column* on a familiar subject of interest.
- A2 Can understand the main points and partly identify specific information in a short *online column* dealing with an everyday subject

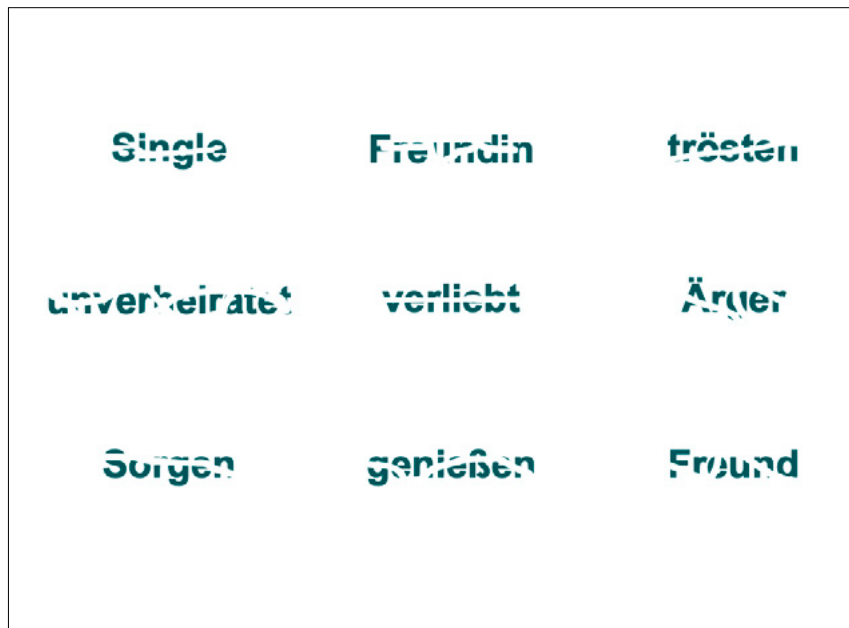
(cf. North et al., 2018, pp. 60–63, italics added by the author)

Considering the topic of this exemplary reading class, the idea is that at this age, relationships are one of the interests of learners. So “love life” is in the top ten of their GFL topic wish list. Thus, a search is conducted on the LATILL platform for an authentic, level-adequate reading text with the keyword “Liebesleben”, setting the filter “A2” for CEFR level, and the filter “500” for the number of words. [Figure 2]

The corpus search offers five texts. To get a broader choice of texts, the CEFR levels “B1” and “B2 and above” are added as filters. One text seems to particularly suit the topic and supports the broad reading goals, however, it is too long. Since the displayed text is marked with a “cc by” license next to the named and linked source, it can be adapted for teaching purposes. After the text search, the second step, “Preparation and variation”, begins. As the reading text is too long and the LATILL “text info”-feature shows several words on CEFR level B1 and some on B2, the text needs to be simplified. [Figure 3]

The text is copied and pasted into the free Chat GPT-Model 3 in the German version, using a prompt defining the role and task<sup>4</sup>. It must be noted that the chatbot cannot reliably tell which words in the German language are associated with which CEFR level. Therefore, the tool’s outcome is to be controlled and assessed by the teacher, e.g. through the use of a text analysis tool. Pasting the text into the LATILL analysis tool it confirms that the text is classified on

<sup>4</sup> Prompt: “Als Linguist vereinfachst du einen Text für den Fremdsprachenunterricht. Die schweren Wörter sollen ersetzt und der Text halb so lang werden.”, Chat GPT 3, free version, July 17 2024



**Figure 4**  
Exercise with "broken words" to train reading fluency

level B1. Several features of the original text are retained, including dialect and colloquial vocabulary, so that the simplified text still offers some advantages of the original authentic text. To offer learners help when needed, the chatbot is asked to create a word list<sup>5</sup>. The produced list is too long and refers to the original text version, so it needs to be manually shortened and finalized. For each of the three paragraphs, the chatbot is asked to create a subtitle<sup>6</sup>. The outcome serves as a helpful inspiration for the creation of the final subtitles that are shorter and more specific. Taking into account the lower level learners within the heterogeneous group, a simpler text version is created by shortening each paragraph manually. Its level A2 is confirmed by the LATILL text analysis tool. In this way, the reading text is differentiated across CEFR levels.

All this of course takes time when done for the first time, especially as it involves two different tools. Nevertheless, with a little practice and applying tested prompts these steps can be quickly completed. As the reading class will be structured in a pre-, while- and post-reading phase with internally differentiated activities, it is now time to create the tasks. The

action-oriented reading goal "Create and submit an online post" can be split into the following can-do statements "Can read and understand an online column on the specific topic of 'Single Life' and can write an online post as response expressing their own opinion" serves as a guideline for task creation, as the task in Figure 5 below shows.

To start the lesson and to recall learners' existing language knowledge, two pictures will be shown, one referring to a "single" person and one to a "married couple". The LATILL image generation generates two images based on the highlighted words in the text. These are added to the text collection and can be downloaded as a Word file.

Finally, the third step of integrating "reading training" is taken: using a standard text program the main words from the word list are designed in such a way that they can be used as an exercise for reading fluency [Figure 4].

According to the learning objectives mentioned above and with the inclusion of all developed learning resources, the task for this scenario could be formulated as show in figure 5.

- 5 Prompt: "Erstelle zum Text eine Wortliste mit den schwierigen Wörtern, aufgeteilt in Verben und Nomen. Schreibe die Nomen mit bestimmten Artikeln auf. Schreibe Verben mit der Perfekt-Form auf. Schreibe darunter Adjektive. Schreibe zu jedem Wort den Beispiel-Satz aus dem Text auf.", Chat GPT 3, free version, July 17 2024
- 6 Prompt: "Füge zu jedem der drei Textabsätze eine kurze, unterhaltsame Überschrift ein.", Chat GPT 3, free version, July 17 2024
- 7 For the formal revision of the text (spelling and grammar check), the free online version of DeepL Write was used. The revised version was partially adopted by the author. <https://www.deepl.com/de/write>, Aug. 16, 2024

### Besser Single oder zu zweit?

Was ist deine Meinung zu dem Thema? Am Ende der Woche kannst du selbst einen Online-Post veröffentlichen. Aber halt: Starten wir am Anfang. Lies heute die *Online-Kolumne* einer jungen Journalistin aus Wien (Österreich).

1. Lies die Überschrift. Welche Wörter sind neu und was bedeuten sie? Besprecht alle Wörter.
2. Überlegt zusammen: Was könnte in dem Text stehen?
3. Wähle eine Text-Version (A2 oder B1). Lies den ersten Text-Abschnitt. Was denken die Freunde? Was denkt die Kolumnen-Schreiberin?
4. Lies den zweiten Text-Abschnitt. Warum kann es schwer sein, den „richtigen“ Menschen zu finden?
5. Lies den dritten Text-Abschnitt. Warum schreibt die Journalistin „Nein, danke.“ Was meint sie?
6. Lies den ganzen Text noch einmal. Versuche beim Lesen, unbekannte Wörter mithilfe des Textes zu verstehen: Lies den ganzen Satz oder auch den Satz davor und danach.
7. Besprecht zusammen die wichtigsten Wörter, die du immer noch nicht verstehst.
8. Sprecht über die Frage: „Besser Single oder zu zweit?“ - Was denkt die Autorin? Und was denkst du?

Ausklang: Worttraining. Wer erkennt das Wort zuerst?

Hausaufgabe: Worttraining: Sieh die „kaputten“ Wörter an und versuche sie zu lesen. Mache das morgen wieder und noch ein weiteres Mal vor der nächsten DaF-Stunde.

Figure 5

Learning task for action-oriented and differentiated reading about "Single Life"

This example aimed to show how an originally authentic text, that meets the individual learners' language levels, can offer rich linguistic input and content while at the same time enabling the learners to develop their language skills enjoyably.

Finally, it is important to mention that ethical aspects and certain limitations in the use of AI-based tools have to be considered. They concern data protection, copyrights, and environmental issues. Also, AI-based tools show various biases, for example when creating images or using a certain language register.

## Conclusion

The article suggested how an action-oriented and internally differentiated GFL reading class can be created with the support of AI-based tools. The example presented in detail can be transferred to foreign language classes other than GFL. The use of AI-based tools can help teachers adapt their learning materials to the learners and thus enhance adaptive learning, offering useful support to GFL teachers. However, it is necessary to judge any of the AI-based tools' outcomes by its linguistic quality, in addition to

other factors. In the end, it is up to teachers' linguistic knowledge and didactical know-how to choose the level-adequate text that is most suitable for their learners. But once teachers find a good way of using new tools, they can build a repertoire of habits and prompts that save capacities and time or deliver inspiration, while improving the offered learning materials for class. In establishing this way of lesson preparation, a high teaching standard can be maintained while staying flexible in terms of content and learners interests<sup>7</sup>.

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