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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO A
BUSINESS GERMAN CURRICULUM:
THE TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY MODEL

BACKGROUND

Can a single course in Business German give students the marketable skills they will need for careers in the global marketplace? Although few of us would answer with a resounding “yes,” most German departments have extremely restricted course offerings for students interested in the practical applications of foreign language study.³⁸ Exceptions are universities such as Georgia Tech, which specialize in language instruction for professional purposes, and large universities such as the University of Rhode Island or the University of Texas at Austin, which are capable of offering separate language tracks for students interested in business and technology. The vast majority of colleges and universities, on the other hand, are unable to offer more than a single course on professional German for a host of reasons: limited faculty members, limited student enrollments in advanced language courses, faculty reluctance to teach new courses in outside fields and unwillingness to sacrifice traditional literary programs, fear of “watering down” a liberal arts curriculum, lack of administrative and financial support, and,

³⁸A special survey by Valters Nollendorfs in *Monatshefte* (1991) listing the Business German programs and courses in the USA and Canada identified 97 departments with a total 134 courses in Business German. Although somewhat out of date, this survey reveals that most programs, especially those of smaller universities and colleges, offer only a single course in business or commercial German, while larger programs generally offer two semesters of Business German in preparation for an internship abroad or for the *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International*. A similar survey by Annette Koeppel, Christiane Keck, and Sabine Schroeder in 1988 revealed essentially the same conclusion: “[The courses] range from a single course on the fourth semester college German level to, more frequently, a single course on the fifth or sixth semester level” (Keck, Introduction 4).

notably, lack of professional or institutional incentives for new instructional programs.³⁹

Nevertheless, it is becoming apparent that in order to survive, German programs need to offer courses of study that appeal to increasingly career-minded students who seek positions in the international marketplace. The growth in student interest for Business German reflects the globalization of markets in the new business economy. This trend offers numerous opportunities for German programs, but, as Cora Lee Nollendorfs warns, the era of internationalization in university education may well proceed without us if we do not adapt our programs to the demands of the future (164). The mission of a German department in the new era, she concludes, is to prepare students in the language and culture of German-speaking countries, to establish and manage exchange and internship programs, to identify and advise students for these programs, and to develop and maintain contacts between universities, businesses and other agencies abroad and at home (161–164).⁴⁰ A program in Business German that adequately fulfills this mission presents a sizable challenge for smaller German departments which are unwilling to sacrifice existing liberal arts programs. Furthermore, as Heidi Saur-Stull points out, “[t]he kind of program a department can offer usually hinges upon the amount of dedication and stamina of the program’s proponent(s)” (108). Our solution at Texas Tech University has been to follow an interdisciplinary approach which combines the expertise of faculty from Business Administration and German with a program of study in the US and abroad. Such an approach necessitates close cooperation between business schools and foreign language departments as well as reasonable support from university administrations.

INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Like most universities, Texas Tech presently has a number of programs which enable students to combine the studies of business and

³⁹The *Monatshefte* survey summarized the following comments from schools participating in the survey: “Among the comments received from schools which do not contemplate introducing Business German programs in the next five years lack of students and qualified teaching faculty seem to predominate. Several schools also feel restricted by their liberal arts curriculum” (328).

⁴⁰Christiane E. Keck, in her outline of the development of Business German as an academic discipline in the USA, repeats many of the arguments offered by Nollendorfs and lists the reasons for the growth in popularity of such programs over the past two decades (Business German 224–232).

language; the most basic approach is to minor in a language while majoring in business. We also have a BA/MBA program which allows students to receive a BA in a foreign language (with a minor in Business) and an MBA after an additional year of study. Likewise, our MA/MBA program combines an MA in German with an MBA. Although there is strong interest in these options, we felt that a more thoroughly integrated program was desirable for several reasons. First, the existing programs present material in two independent, parallel tracks; except for a course in Business German, students have little opportunity to synthesize their German studies with their business classes. Grandin and Hedderich reach the same conclusion, noting that “whereas the earlier attitude was to create a program on the surface by encouraging students to study language on the one side and business on the other, the newer approach merges the two, allowing each to support each other” (128). A truly interdisciplinary program will allow students to integrate linguistic, cultural and professional subject matter, to perceive the practical applications of their studies and, ultimately, to learn to think and work globally.

Second, the business faculty recognized that any program without a foreign study requirement would not provide students with the skills potential employers are seeking. In addition to language proficiency and technical knowledge, students also need foreign experience and intercultural sensitivity in order to appreciate the differences in doing business abroad. Patricia Paulsell, citing business surveys which list foreign internships as “the single most important factor in the development of international expertise” (243), argues that experiential learning in an international setting is absolutely vital for true cross-cultural proficiency. For these reasons, our Business German curriculum includes a strong foreign study component as well as pedagogical strategies that prepare students for the situations they will encounter abroad.

Third, the existing options did not provide for the application of theoretical knowledge in a practical environment. As Jürgen Bolten has argued, an integrated, practically-oriented approach is absolutely essential for students to master the natural complexity of international business situations. According to Bolten, a successful program requires:

“... ein so weit wie moeglich integratives Konzept, das von jenen realen Situationen kommunikativen Handelns ausgeht, mit denen die Lerner spaeter konfrontiert werden, und aus diesem Grund die Lerner auch so frueh wie moeglich mit der Komplexitaet dieser Situationen vertraut macht.” (20f.)

This is a necessity not only for business majors interested in the practical training. According to a *Monatshefte* survey from 1991, only 20% of Business German students are business majors, and since most of these students have little or no experience in current business practices, it is unreasonable to assume that they could successfully utilize purely linguistic information from the classroom to solve “real world” problems in a foreign environment.

The creation of an international business / foreign language curriculum calls for intimate collaboration among different disciplines. As Richard Edelstein cogently puts it, “[w]e must attempt to build more bridges between German departments and the business school” (7). This is necessary for professional as well as practical reasons: greater expertise, resources and support, more practical appeal for students, greater institutional recognition, etc. Although the advantages are obvious, an interdepartmental approach also raises questions of purview, control and administration, allocation of resources and student advising. In addition to such formal issues, questions of methodology also arise, for as Edelstein notes, “the pedagogy of interdisciplinary teaching has, in most respects, not yet been invented” (7). Nevertheless, if students are to master the complexities of intercultural communication in the field of international business, there is really no pedagogically sound alternative to a practically oriented, interdisciplinary approach to Business German. The challenge is to devise a program of instruction which does not overstretch the limitations of a liberal arts language department, but which provides comprehensive education and training for the demands of the real world. The following outline details our attempt to meet this challenge with the new International Business program at Texas Tech University.

THE TEXAS TECH IB CURRICULUM: HISTORY AND OUTLINE

The impetus for a new program came from the field of business marketing, where Dale Duhan and Jim Wilcox received a grant from the

Department of Education to create a new International Business (IB) curriculum. Duhan's primary goals, as stated in his design proposal for the IB program, were "to ensure that the graduates of the program have a working knowledge of a foreign language, and intelligence in the historical, legal, economic, political and business culture aspects of the countries in which that language is used."

Three professors representing the fields of Spanish, French and German were recruited to form a collaborative team to organize and create the foreign language curriculum. Invited speakers provided valuable advice and expertise, and funds were made available to enable the language professors to participate in workshops and seminars for specialized training in the field of business language acquisition. The ACTFL conferences, EMU Conferences on Language and Communication for World Business and the Professions, and especially the *Lehrerfortbildungsseminare* offered by the Institut für Internationale Kommunikation (IIK) in Düsseldorf were invaluable in preparing the German curriculum. Since student interest was highest in Spanish, the Spanish curriculum was implemented first on an experimental basis, followed a year later by the German and French programs.

Since our objective is to provide students not only with linguistic proficiency and theoretical knowledge, but with practical experience and marketable skills in Business German, we decided that the curriculum should emphasize the following principles:

- Continuity of language instruction throughout the program
- A content-based, communicative approach to language acquisition
- Practical applications of German in solving typical business problems
- Familiarity with cultural practices and social issues in Germany
- Current business practices and trends in Germany
- Transferable management skills, including international self-confidence and cultural sensitivity
- Experience abroad, including both theoretical and practical components
- Internalization of studies at Texas Tech University

Besides core requirements in Business Administration required for the IB major (Accounting, Information Systems, Economics, Finance,

Management and Marketing), students are expected to complete the following courses in language instruction:

- Two years of language instruction, or the equivalent
- A summer immersion program in Germany, including a language course and a course on contemporary Germany with an emphasis on business
- A course on German Culture and Society (as an alternative to the study abroad course on contemporary Germany)
- A Business German course
- Three one credit Business German Workshops
- A study abroad semester and/or foreign internship program

Because the German faculty members are responsible for teaching only the first four elements in this curriculum, we were not required to make radical changes to our existing courses. The first two years of language training can be adapted relatively easily to include basic business vocabulary and to introduce students to business settings and topics.⁴¹ Likewise, a summer immersion program can include visits to businesses and governmental agencies in addition to the usual fare of museums, castles and churches. In order to accommodate students' interests, our own immersion program has remained very flexible. For example, during a free weekend in Berlin, students have the option of writing reports on cultural topics (concerts, museum visits, etc.) or on business topics such as trade fairs, banks, governmental agencies, or German firms. The primary purpose of the immersion program, however, remains developing language proficiency and familiarizing students with life in Germany. When increased numbers of IB students participate in our program, a more structured approach to business topics will become necessary.

The German Culture and Society course and the Business German course are taught by the German faculty, typically for students in their

⁴¹Grandin and Hedderich show how the University of Rhode Island was able to create business language tracks for beginning language students by "substituting portions of traditional textbooks with situations and topics relevant to the business major" (131). Business materials for first and second year students have recently become available. Maria Egbert and Andrea Vlatten, for example, have assembled videos and other materials designed primarily for first and second year students, *Aktuelle Videos für Wirtschaftsdeutsch*. Beach and Somerholter also offer useful information about using video for beginning business language instruction. Egbert and Vlatten's *A Practical Primer for Developing a Business German Program* lists many of the teaching materials and resources currently available (113–118).

third or fourth year of study. Because the IB students in these courses will have had business training and foreign experience, the German faculty member will be primarily responsible for covering general cultural and political topics in contemporary Germany as well as the linguistic aspects of business communication. These courses stress vocabulary and composition skills, and prepare students for reading business texts, discussing current events and professional topics, and composing résumés and business correspondence. This approach allows the language professor to concentrate on his or her area of expertise without the pressures of mastering technical economic principles or maintaining intimate familiarity with current business conditions in Germany and the EU.

Linguistic abilities alone, however, are clearly insufficient for students to perform well in the international marketplace. The new IB program therefore contains a heavy emphasis on the *cultural* aspects of doing business abroad. This is necessary, as Edelstein explains, because “the complexities of cross-cultural communication are such that language forms only one part of the problematic. Body language, presentation, the role of rituals and the social mores of a society all come together when individuals meet to negotiate a business deal” (4). In short, “cultural competency” is just as important as linguistic competency (Koeppel 42). Ideally, all students will become familiar with German culture through first-hand experience during periods of study or internships abroad. As Grandin and Hedderich argue, there is simply no alternative to personal experience of a foreign culture: “If students are to achieve both linguistic and cultural proficiency, then they must put their skills into practice, they must go abroad, either as students or practicing interns in a cultural setting” (128).

In the Texas Tech program, students completing their sophomore year are encouraged to participate in our summer immersion program which provides an introduction to contemporary Germany and prepares students for later internships and study abroad. Although many students currently enroll in our own program, the university is seeking funding for additional scholarships to permit all IB students to participate in an immersion program; when such funding becomes available, we will institute a cost-neutral “no excuses” approach, and an immersion program will become an IB requirement. More advanced students are encouraged to study at a German university or *Fachhochschule* for a

semester abroad, and all students are expected to participate in an internship before completing the program.

For students on the Texas Tech campus, we decided that the best alternative (or complement) to internships or study abroad would be group projects with a native speaker which utilize current and authentic business materials (readily available over the internet). These projects seek to provide the students with experiential learning from a native speaker, an aspect of cross-cultural training that Patricia Paulsell argues “should not be left to chance, but should be integrated as an experiential component into the business language curriculum” (246). This approach allows us to continue our emphasis on cultural sensitivity and international experience in the otherwise sterile environment of a university classroom. In order to encourage group interaction and discussion in German, we created three one-credit workshop courses organized on a lab format with a maximum of 15 students in each course.⁴²

THE IB WORKSHOPS

The workshops are the primary new feature of the IB major. In order to ensure a sound pedagogical approach in the workshops, the German faculty member was responsible for teaching the initial workshops, obtaining and evaluating instructional materials and creating course handbooks.⁴³ In the future, however, the workshops will be taught by graduate students from a German-speaking country who are seeking an MBA at Texas Tech.⁴⁴ This arrangement offers numerous advantages to all concerned: the German faculty members are free to concentrate on

⁴²Christiane Bohnert also notes the value of such a workshop approach despite apparent faculty limitations: “Ein einstündiges Tutorium oder eine Diskussionsstunde wären ideal, um den [Wirtschaftskurs] abzurunden. Leider fehlt hierzu das Personal” (89).

⁴³Lorum Stratton developed the Spanish workshops during the first year; in the second year, José Santos created the French, and Charles Grair the German workshops. Given the enormous differences between the countries using these languages for commerce, the workshops in each language group developed somewhat different formats.

⁴⁴The Georgia Institute of Technology also utilizes foreign students in their summer intensive program, “Language for Business and Technology.” According to Bettina Cothran, in addition to two professors and two assistants, they “have three native speakers, students themselves, who sit in on all classes and assist when we break up into smaller groups. Program participants live in specially assigned dorm spaces with a native speaker resident available for homework assistance and after hour activities” (Georgia 16). As in the TTU program, the foreign students at Georgia Tech serve as cultural and linguistic facilitators, assisting the students in their projects and activities and providing current and authentic information about practices in their home countries.

language instruction without disproportionate obligations to the business program. The business school has an additional mechanism for recruiting and supporting foreign students in their MBA program. The German, Austrian and Swiss graduate students have opportunities to teach, to receive financial support while in the USA, and to become intimately acquainted with American students and the differences between the two cultures. The American students have the advantage of working in close contact with a native speaker, near to their own age, who is knowledgeable about current practices and trends in his or her home country. Moreover, it is hoped that the students establish friendships which will lead to later professional contacts.

Students taking the IB workshops will have already finished the equivalent of a minor in German, and they will have reached (minimally) an intermediate level of language proficiency. Although we encourage them to take additional literary courses in the German program and possibly obtain a double major, the IB workshops allow the students to continue their practice of Business German outside of the German program. We thus ensure the continuity of foreign language training throughout their studies in the IB program at Texas Tech.

Unlike the more traditional Business German course, which focuses on business terminology and the comprehension and composition of economic texts, the workshops deal with the *practical* and *cultural* aspects of doing business in Germany. A number of studies have shown that speaking and listening skills are considered much more useful abroad than reading comprehension (Grandin and Hedderich 130f.). However, as Bettina Cothran reminds us, “oral communication will probably remain the most difficult skill to perfect in a teaching situation” (“Listening Comprehension” 76). In order to foster oral proficiency, our program follows a communicative approach which stresses oral interaction in class discussions and group projects, and which includes audio and video activities to acquaint students with authentic language use. In addition to communicative skills, the workshops also aim to develop cultural proficiency in the field of business, which includes familiarity with business customs and etiquette as well as with the historical, political, social, and personal aspects of working in Germany. Since we want the workshops to emphasize *current* issues and practices, we include activities and projects that subject students to the business

situations and challenges that an American would typically face in Germany today.

The project-oriented approach allows the students to practice and improve language skills while concentrating on “authentic” business related tasks. The didactic methodology underlying the workshops is thus indebted to various German Across the Curriculum (GAC) programs in which students learn while actively engaged in solving problems in their own discipline. “In GAC programs,” Anderson explains, “while additional language learning is an inevitable outcome, the stress has been shifted to the *use* of German to master new content in the target disciplines” (149, emphasis Anderson’s). Similarly, our workshops provide an arena for students to use and develop their language skills while discussing and working on course projects. The foreign TAs who lead the workshops will not *teach* German, not even Business German per se; rather, they will lead discussions in the target language and act as intermediaries and guides to a foreign culture and a foreign business environment.

The three German IB workshops cover the German and European market (*der deutsche und europäische Markt*), the workplace (*im Betrieb und im Büro*), and the founding of a fictional company (*die Gründung einer Firma*). The teaching units of the IB workshops consist of reports and discussions of current events in business and politics, case studies and role playing activities. Because materials should accurately reflect the language and the textual forms of current business practices in Germany (Bolten 20–23), much of the course content is supplied by the students through their own research on the internet. Although a wide variety of excellent textbooks are available for courses in Business German, we concluded that these were inappropriate for the workshop format.⁴⁵ By having the students create and research their own projects, the IB workshops remain flexible to changing events and trends in the German economy while fostering the students’ ability to perform individual and group research in the target language. Furthermore, the

⁴⁵We currently use Gudrun Clay, *Geschäftsdeutsch. An Introduction to Business German*, Second Edition (New York et al: McGraw-Hill, 1995) for our course on Business German. Because the workshops seek to reproduce actual business situations, we felt that authentic materials were more appropriate in these courses. Walter Josef Denk presents a cogent rationale and a practical introduction to using authentic materials in the Business German classroom (78–83).

individualized and goal-oriented nature of the projects serves to heighten student interest and leads to more satisfying results.

The workshop format requires students to transfer theoretical knowledge into practical action and thus develop specific business skills. Students are expected to perform “authentic” business tasks, such as locating actual job listings and composing résumés, job applications, and business correspondence. Likewise, role playing activities, such as interviews, telephone conversations and business negotiations, recreate the situations students will encounter later in their professional lives. The workshop entitled “die Gründung einer Firma” requires the students to establish and run their own fictional company through the course of a typical business cycle. By contextualizing the role playing activities in an ongoing project, students learn firsthand the dimensions and challenges of the business world and take a personal interest in the success of their activities. The summer minicourse offered by the University of Rhode Island (Deutsche Sommerschule am Atlantik) follows the same pedagogical strategy (Reinhart 100–122). This approach is particularly useful because it forces students to make meaningful business decisions: “Having students create their own companies and guiding them through an entire business cycle shifts the emphasis of the case study from passive reception and reproduction of knowledge to active participation and decision making” (103). The students in the Rhode Island course identified strongly with their company, and this led “to a high level of motivation, commitment, enthusiasm, and last, but not least, fun” (120).

A final objective of the IB workshops is to prepare students for certification in one of the business exams offered through the Goethe Institute and the AATG, the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* (for the intermediate level) and the *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch* (for the advanced level). These exams offer specific attainable goals for the students as well as an objective means of assessment and evaluation for the IB curriculum as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The Texas Tech IB program represents a model of business language training for universities and colleges with limited faculty resources. In order to provide students with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed for the international marketplace, the curriculum is divided between the business school and the German program in such a way that

each discipline complements the other without overstressing faculty responsibilities and expertise. The German program teaches language skills and introduces students to the culture and society of contemporary Germany; the business school presents technical knowledge and training; and the IB workshops allow students to synthesize their studies and gain practical experience and training in the target language. Together with internships and programs of study abroad, this curriculum provides a comprehensive program of Business German for international business majors.

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