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EXPANDING THE FIELD: CURRENT ISSUES IN BUSINESS GERMAN¹

There is a place for the instruction of foreign languages for the professions at a much earlier point than it has been undertaken over the last decades (Boehringer, 1997:2).

In the past few years, the teaching of language for special purposes has been moving more into focus. Especially in the so-called less frequently taught languages, a term which now seems to cover most languages aside from Spanish, the teaching of business-oriented language is considered an incentive to increase enrollment. Cothran & Gramberg (2000) identified 141 college departments offering classes in German Business related classes as well as majors and/or minors. This number represents an increase from the 97 departments listed in 1991.

Yet, the “most serious threat to our enrollment pattern is the continued belief that we can maintain our curriculum and have our students learn foreign languages as we have taught them the past decade” (Villena-Alvarez 2000:2). There seems to be some resistance to, or at least disdain for, teaching language with a business perspective. “As an academic subject, ... [language skill] becomes intellectually respectable only when learners are able to use it to express and discuss abstract ideas” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 3). Purves (1984) and Hawisher (1990) also bemoan the content/skill dichotomy in our field and all its implications. In larger departments, there is a tendency to delegate skills-providing classes (especially in the first and second year) to TAs, instructors and beginning assistant professors. Content classes (upper level literature classes, for

¹As always, I am most grateful for all the help provided by Wendell Johnson. I have also benefited from discussions with Volker Langeheine.

example) are taught by tenured faculty.² This situation persists in many institutions, because Business German is considered an applied, *skills*-oriented field and is juxtaposed to literary studies, a *content*-oriented field. Whatever the value of the dichotomy content / skill, students definitely have a very pragmatic perspective.

The general mindset of many students can be summarized by a desire to graduate quickly and get well-paying jobs (Cothran 1999/2002). According to a recent survey in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, students choose to go to college for a variety of reasons, chief among them “to be able to get a better job” (71.6%) and “to be able to make more money” (70.5%). This recognized motivation led to the development of applied language courses and, in many cases, increased interest in foreign language classes. Indeed, all things being equal, a student who is proficient in a foreign language will be the preferred hire.³

We should look at business language not as a dilution of the curriculum or even a threat to the academic canon but rather as a useful addition. The target language (TL) business climate is an integrated and increasingly important part of a language’s culture. Issues from globalization to advertisements and the daily routines at the workplace constitute valid and significant topics for cultural comparison. The general business climates in Germany and the US, which can perhaps be characterized as, respectively, “wait and see, discuss and try” versus “see and decide” attitudes, are also reflected in the recent political climate (Stern 2000). Due to similarities in a culture’s approach to business and non-business issues, we can use the business approach to explain differences between target and source culture. Such a course of study may be attractive for many students who are interested in careers in the business sector. We can build on this interest and expand the focus of Business German / *Wirtschaftsdeutsch* (WD) in scope to include the beginning learner, a process which is already underway in some departments at universities in the US. Thus, business-related issues and terminology should be introduced into the German Language classroom at an earlier point or even right from the outset (Barbe 2001b). With this potential expansion of the field to include

²There is even a question if the dichotomy content / skill is valid. Both, content *and* skill are dependent on each other. We cannot just teach content or just teach skills. For more on this distinction see Barbe (2001a).

³During a meeting at the Goethe-Institut Chicago in 1997, Cothran talked about a survey she had conducted in Georgia about the attitudes of businesses towards foreign language majors. See also Christine Uber Grosse (1998).

also novice learners, we may have to rethink the designation WD in order to cover the entire discipline as well as a subfield in the discipline.

BUSINESS GERMAN / *WIRTSCHAFTSDEUTSCH*: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

So far, German instructors have made a bipartite distinction in the field between WD and German for the Professions / *Deutsch für den Beruf* (DfB). Biographical sketches of German language professionals often describe a research interest in Business German, yet we may ask what this term actually entails? “What exactly is Business German? Is it the theoretical jargon of the economist? Or the business language of management? Or the more general language of normal office communications that has a certain business slant?” (Cothran & Gramberg 2000:151) Since the introduction of DfB, the term WD is used in two ways, (i) as an umbrella term covering the whole field and (ii) as a term for a subfield in contrast to DfB. This calls for a rethinking of the terminology. In the following, we will briefly differentiate between WD and DfB and then add a third focus, which is beginning business-oriented German.

In the area of WD, students are expected—in addition to being highly proficient in German in general and business-appropriate language in particular—to be well versed in general business practices, business organizations, and economics. Thus, WD includes the lexicon of the economist as well as the business language of management. To demonstrate proficiency, students can take the *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International* (PWI). Although a challenging test, 97 (out of 106) US participants passed the exam in 2000 (Spiegelmann 2001). Boehringer (2001) sees a growing dissatisfaction with PWI because the test requires high language proficiency, which is often seen as being unrealistic in the course of usual college preparation. Thus, the successful completion of PWI suggests that additional time and instruction are needed.

As it turns out, the designation WD can even be considered an impediment to some learners. They might be intimidated by, or not interested in, business and economics per se but, nonetheless, want to know how to interact in professional working situations in Germany. Complaints occur that Business German sounds too difficult and students do not know anything about business. Because of the time-investment needed, most students do not reach the high proficiency and business knowledge level necessary for PWI, but they could definitely profit from business-oriented language.

For these students, preparation for the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* examination, (ZdfB) introduced in 1997, is a realistic, achievable goal. In 2000, 91 of the 110 people who took the test in the US passed the exam (Spiegelmann 2001). Attaining the proficiency level to pass successfully the ZDfB requires less time than for the PWI. The accompanying field of learning is the above-mentioned DfB, where students learn how to interact and function in work and/or office situations. Many students who want to pass the ZDfB do not aspire to pass the PWI afterwards, so that both tests have different target groups.⁴ University offerings reflect students' objectives, as students prepare for PWI as well as ZDfB, perhaps recently with a focus on ZDfB.

So far, business-oriented language has been taught primarily at the intermediate and advanced level. At this time, we should also consider the inclusion of business-oriented language into the beginning college and even high school classroom. This recent trend should have its own designation. Consequently, in addition to WD and DfB, a third level of business-oriented language study is needed. WD is situated at the advanced level and DfB at the intermediate level. This third subfield is German in professional situations / *Deutsch in beruflichen Situationen* (DibS).⁵

FOCUS ON THE BEGINNING LEARNER: GERMAN IN PROFESSIONAL SITUATIONS / *DEUTSCH IN BERUFLICHEN SITUATIONEN*

The teaching of business-oriented language can be included in the traditional language classroom in the very beginning and can then be used as a point of departure for lively discussions about cultural distinctions. Particularly in the beginning classroom, the teaching of business-oriented language entails primarily the acquisition of additional terminology, modes of interaction, and situations pertaining to the workplace.

While the integration of business-oriented topics is possible, we should consider the rationale to include business-oriented terminology, concepts, and cultural information in beginning German classrooms. Many high school students and beginning college students are interested in business-related issues, as exemplified by the surge of enrollment in Business Colleges. According to a recent survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a group of college-bound high school students, 16.2%,

⁴See Boehringer 2001 for a thorough discussion of the differences.

⁵This term can also be found in Boehringer 1997.

wants to study in a business-related field. With the inclusion of business-oriented foreign language at an even earlier point, we can satisfy the new type of students who “are driven by an interest to obtain communicative and intercultural abilities useful in professional contexts” (Boehringer 2002:102).

The following table illustrates terminological and organizational differences.

<i>Wirtschaftsbezogenes Deutsch / Business-oriented German</i> ⁶			
designation	<i>Wirtschaftsdeutsch</i> Business German	<i>Deutsch für den Beruf / German for the professions</i>	<i>Deutsch in beruflichen Situationen / German in professional situations</i>
language level	advanced / intermediate high	intermediate	beginning
business processes knowledge	significant	beginning	none, or some gained through personal work experience
textbook support	Paulsell (1999), Merrifield (1994), Clay (1994)	Hager (2001), Höffgen (1996)	supplemental materials ⁷
goal	high proficiency in business-related concepts as well as knowledge of economics	ability to interact in work / office situations, familiarity with general work / office practices	generate interest for <i>Deutsch für den Beruf</i> and <i>Wirtschaftsdeutsch</i>
standardized test	PWI	ZDfB	none available

⁶Volker Langeheine introduced me to these terms.

⁷At this level there is no direct textbook support in the American market. We can find German publications such as Klett's *Wirtschaftsdeutsch für Anfänger Grundstufe*. While this book is serviceable in a professional context, for example, teaching German to business professionals, it is not advisable to use in the beginning classroom (high school and college), as its focus is on highly motivated, self-driven learners. What we need at this level is supplemental support to the textbook used in the classroom.

So far the focus in the US has been on teaching Business-oriented German in the intermediate and advanced college classroom, with a few exceptions.⁸ The addition of a focus on teaching business-related language from the very beginning of language instruction necessitates a change in terminology, additional curricular development, and perhaps even its own examination.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored the expansion of the discipline commonly referred to as Business German / *Wirtschaftsdeutsch*. This applied field aims to provide students with genuine abilities for workplace competition and is applicable also in later life. Because many students have a very practical focus, the field becomes attractive for students in high school as well as in college. At this time, we need to attract teachers to include business-oriented language into their classrooms. This will be successful if supplemental teaching units become widely available and are, moreover, easy to integrate into the curriculum. They have to be textbook related. With the addition of business-oriented language from the very beginning, we now see a tripartite division in the field, where each subfield has its own characteristics and requirements.

Contrary to expectations, business-oriented language classes do not take students away from literature, but rather may motivate students to consider foreign language studies as minors or majors. Business-oriented classes thus help to generate further interest in target language culture and literature, because students recognize that particularly in business situations it is helpful to be familiar with the target culture.

.... any language that opens you to a different culture and people, to different sounds and rhythms, to different ways of formulating thoughts, turns you into a slightly different person. It makes you newly aware of yourself and the world. (Schmich 2003:1)

⁸An example is the Nebraska Business Language Initiative, which deals with the teaching of Business German at the high school level.

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