

The Development of German as a Foreign Language Discipline in a Multilingual Europe

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Abstract

In this paper, I review the development of German as a Foreign Language (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*) (GFL) discipline in Germany. Many of the changes in GFL have been greatly influenced by the social, economic and political changes which impacted Germany and Europe from the post-war period till today. By recognizing how these changes have directly and indirectly influenced GFL, we can better understand how and why foreigners currently learn German in Germany. I provide brief overviews of these changes: the official acceptance of multilingualism as a cornerstone of a new European language policy, the influence of the Council of Europe and the European Union in furthering multilingualism throughout its member states including Germany, immigration to Germany and the present economic situation there; and describe how each change has influenced German language education in its own right. I conclude my paper with a description of the German Adult Association (DVV) and explain how it has become a major institution in fostering and developing GFL in a multilingual Europe as a result of these influential changes.

The Acceptance of Multilingualism in Europe

Multilingualism, the ability to use multiple languages, is often looked upon by monolinguals as a special skill, when, in reality, it has been and continues to be a common feature of many communities throughout the world and is a part of everyday life for countless people. “At least half of the world’s population is bilingual or plurilingual” (Council of Europe: Facts and Fun). For a social phenomenon, which is very common, we know surprisingly little of it as a whole. There are various reasons for this:

Multilinguals may use a number of languages on account of many different social, cultural and economic reasons. They may live in a multilingual community, or overlapping bilingual communities, or be in contact with several monolingual communities. Their proficiency in each of their languages is likely to differ, and may fluctuate over time. Their languages may have different roles and functions, they may use them separately or codeswitch, and they are still described as multilingual whether they know three or seven languages. (Kemp 12-13)

As a focus of research, language experts tend to investigate the complexities of multilingualism separately, which raises basic questions such as how many people are multilingual, why they become multilingual and how they maintain their multilingualism. Because of the many social, cultural, economic and even political aspects related to these complexities of multilingualism, it is reasonably understandable why many governments and educational institutions may choose to address some of the issues related to this field of linguistics but not all of them.

Europe is one area where multilingualism has received a great deal of attention in relatively recent years, not only from linguistic researchers but also from government ministers, business leaders and educational planners. A richly populated continent made up of fifty countries with a population of 733 million inhabitants with 225 indigenous languages, Europe has always been culturally and linguistically diverse. It would be wrong to assume that it has always embraced its multilingual heritage, however. One could even make the argument that the notion of monolingualism was a European idea, which grew out of the rise of nationalism after the disintegration of the multiethnic empires in the 19th century and after World War I, as more and more countries came to relate a standard language to their notion of a national identity. People who were not competent in the designated national language were often looked upon as outsiders who belonged elsewhere.

It took the terrible brunt of another world war to make Europeans finally realize that nationalism would not lead to sustained peace and security and that only through increased political and economic integration would they be able to achieve a more stable alternative for their future. Along with this major shift in European political expectations, many leaders realized that the official acceptance of the continent's various languages would play an integral role in this heightened level of

cooperation among its nations. It was just a few years after the end of the Second World War when multilingualism was officially embraced and nurtured at various levels of European society through the combined efforts of intergovernmental and national organizations. The process of accepting multilingualism was slow and incremental, however, and like many good ideas it presented its own unique set of challenges, which had and continues to have a great impact on the citizens of Europe.

The Council of Europe's Impact on Foreign Language Education

There was widespread support among European countries for the promotion of multilingualism in Europe following the Second World War, but no real precedent existed on how to actually deal with the daunting challenges of creating an official body with equal recognition for all European languages. One point that was clear, however, was that it was important that not one single country, but as many countries as possible, share in the creation of a cohesive language-use system which would span across Europe.

One of the first steps in this direction was taken by the Council of Europe, an international organization established in 1949, headquartered in Strasbourg, made up of 47 member states and 800 million residents, which strives to promote democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural cooperation among its member countries. The Council of Europe recognized early on that language was an important facet of cultural cooperation and made the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning an integral tenet of the European Cultural Convention Treaty, which was ratified by the 49 signatory members in 1954 (Council of Europe: The Council of Europe in Brief).

There were additional steps taken by the Council over the years in the promotion of language learning. "Early programmes of international co-operation in Strasbourg focused on the democratisation of language learning for the mobility of persons and ideas, and on the promotion of the European heritage of cultural and linguistic diversity. The projects assisted member states in implementing reforms aimed at developing learners' communication skills and encouraged innovation in language teaching and teacher training, with an emphasis on a learner-centred approach" (North, et al. 1-2). The first intergovernmental conference on European co-operation in language teaching was passed in 1957, the first major project on language teaching began in 1963 and in 1975, the first "Threshold Level"

specification was published.

The Threshold Level was an operational model “which specific groups of learners (tourists, businesspersons, migrants, etc.) require for the use of a language for independent communication in a country in which this language is the everyday medium for communication. By thus identifying these groups’ language needs, they were able to pinpoint the knowledge and know-how required for attaining this communication “threshold” (Council of Europe: Education and Languages, Language Policy). The adoption of the Threshold Level was significant because it offered a conceptual framework of target specifications for language teachers and learners. Although originally introduced for English learners, it was quickly adopted for use in other European languages, with the addition of two new target levels, the Waystage Level, a lower level, and Vantage Level, a higher level.

These levels provided a basis for designing language programs in many European languages. It was around the time of the publication of the Threshold Level, that language learning in general witnessed a change in teaching philosophy, moving away from the traditional grammar-translation method to become more communicatively oriented as evidenced in D.A. Wilkin’s introduction of the functional-notional syllabus. The emphasis on communication was quickly adopted by the Council of Europe in designing a framework of levels of communicative meanings in various languages, and this would become particularly influential in the teaching of German which I will explain later in this paper.

In 2001, the Waystage-Threshold-Vantage framework was incorporated into the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which describes language learners’ abilities in the areas of speaking, reading, listening and writing at six reference levels from basic user (A1-A2), independent user (B1-B2) to proficient user (A1-A2). The Council of Europe began to utilize a language policy, which stressed more communication and intercultural skills in recognition of a European society that was becoming increasingly mobile and therefore required greater diversification in language learning. The CEFR would be the framework, which would provide for the implementation of this new, expanded pedagogical approach. According to Martyniuk:

The CEFR is a comprehensive descriptive scheme offering a tool for reflecting on what is involved not only in language use, but also in language learning and teaching. The Framework provides a common basis and a common language for

the elaboration of syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, textbooks, teacher training programmes, and for relating language examinations to one another. It allows the different partners involved in planning and delivering language provision and in assessing language progress and proficiency, to coordinate and situate their efforts. (11)

CFER is not a prescriptive set of standards, although many textbook publishers might suggest this. It is rather a descriptive standard, which provides educators and institutions a reference tool for learners and educators. “The aim of the CEFR is to provide a mental framework that enables people to say where they are, not a specification telling them where they ought to be (North et al 3 in Martyniuk #33). It has been widely adopted by language institutions and certificate programs throughout Europe and there is now interest in it overseas, too.

The European Union’s Influence in Fostering Multilingualism

Any discussion of European multilingualism could not be made without mention of the European Union (EU) and its strong influence in fostering multilingualism through the regulations it has created and passed on the use of multiple languages. Although primarily a political and economic organization, the EU has also been very influential in the development of European multilingualism and, unlike the Council of Europe, it makes laws and institutes regulations, which are binding on its member countries. There is not one official language of Europe, but 23. “Among the 23 languages are members of the Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Finno-Urgic, Baltic, Celtic, and even Semitic families” (Greene). By designating 23 languages as official, the EU made its mission that its future would be forever a multilingual one.

Although language education policy falls into the respective realm of the matters of state of each individual member country, the EU actively promotes multilingualism on the whole:

The European Commission fosters multilingualism and language learning in order to 1) promote intercultural dialogue and a more inclusive society; 2) help the public to develop a sense of EU citizenship; 3) open up opportunities for young people to study and work abroad and 4) open up new markets for EU businesses competing at the global level. The EU sets the example for

multilingualism by entitling all EU citizens the right to contact and receive a response from any EU institution in one of the EU's official languages. (European Commission).

In addition, the EU has as its active goal the 'mother-tongue+2' objective, which was set by EU heads of state and government at the Barcelona Summit in 2002. This objective seeks to encourage EU citizens and residents to become proficient in using two additional languages in addition to their own mother tongue from a very early age. According to a survey conducted in 2007, "60% of students in upper secondary education studied two or more foreign languages and one third studied one foreign language, while 6% did not study any foreign language" (Eurostat Press Office).

One of the main benefits that the Union has bestowed on its citizens is the right to free movement, which entails not only the crossing of borders without passport checks for purposes of business or tourism but also conferring on its citizens the right to live, work and study in another EU country. "The total number of non-nationals (i.e. persons who are not citizens of their country of residence) living on the territory of the EU Member States on 1 January 2009 was 31.9 million, representing 6.4% of the total EU population. More than one third of them (11.9 million), were citizens of another Member State." (Eurostat: Statistics in Focus). Many of these "mobile citizens" have chosen to leave their native countries for economic reasons as some European countries offer greater employment opportunities than their own. Possessing the legal right to reside and work in another European country does not lessen the difficulty of everyday life there, however. Everyday affairs must be conducted in another language so it is paramount that these "mobile citizens" learn the language of their host country as quickly as possible and nowhere has this become as apparent in recent years as in Germany where immigration has greatly increased as I will discuss later.

The Role of German in a Multilingual Europe

The German language has a very significant status in Europe. It is the official language of Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, a majority language of Luxembourg and Switzerland, a minority language with official status in Belgium and has official status in some parts of Italy (in South Tirol), Denmark (in South Jutland and Northern Schleswig, Poland (in Silesia and Upper Silesia) and is

recognized as a minority language in parts of Denmark, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. It is the most widely spoken native language in the EU and the second most widely spoken language in Europe (after Russian), one of the official languages of the European Union and is one of three working languages of the European Commission along with English and French.

Although German is a major European language, its popularity in foreign language education has mirrored the political and socio/economic fortunes of the country in which it is spoken the most, Germany. Following the widespread devastation of Europe in the Second World War, German was not as popular among students wishing to embark on the study of a new foreign language as it had been in the past. With Germany in ruins, its economy in shambles and its political leaders non-influential, there was not much interest to learn German, beyond some academics and scientific scholars who desired to read literature and replicate research in the original language. Even in some European countries where German had once flourished and co-existed along with other languages, its use by governments, schools, media, and even among private individuals immediately following the Second World War was not only strongly discouraged but also made punishable by law in some places. The aggressive intent of Nazi Germany to force the German language and culture on the citizens of Europe was still too fresh in their minds for them to readily accept German as a primary foreign language in their education systems. The climb back to respectability and acceptance of the German language would not come about through the explicit efforts of German political institutions but through Germany's membership in supra-national organizations which encompassed European affairs, primarily the Council of Europe and the EU. Germany's membership in these organizations was not sufficient by itself to engender increased interest in the German language among Europeans, however. That would have to come about through Germany's development as a major economic power within Europe.

Germany experienced rapid growth in its economy during the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle) years in the 1950s to 1970s, with much of the production made possible due to the labor of large numbers of *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) from other countries. According to a report conducted in 2009, "between 1955 and 1973, West Germany recruited 14 million guest workers during the "economic miracle" that followed World War II" (European Commission). The emphasis was on the word "guest" as the general political assumptions were that these workers would

stay in Germany temporarily, and return to their native countries after the end of their two-year work permits. These contracts were often extended, however, because it was much more cost-effective for German companies to keep their foreign employees on rather than train new ones.

At the beginning of this movement of *Gastarbeiter* to Germany, not much thought was given to integration programs or the instruction of the German language due to the temporary conditions of the guest workers' work contracts and because the type of work they performed required only minimal knowledge of German anyway. A large number of these *Gastarbeiter*, who came from countries such as Turkey, Italy, Yugoslavia, Spain and Greece chose, however, to stay in Germany permanently and many had their families and relatives join them. Once it was realized and accepted that many of these foreign workers would not return to their countries of origin, it became apparent that they would require language-learning assistance for their immediate, communicative needs and so a shift from the traditional German language teaching approach of grammar-translation to one that was more task-oriented was developed to match the realistic needs of these newcomers.

The recent rise and continued stability of the economy in Germany has again made it a magnet for new European immigrants seeking employment from economically underachieving parts of Europe where jobs are scarce and the future prospects bleak. "According to population numbers released by Germany's statistics bureau, the number of foreigners living in the country has now reached a record 7.2 million and is growing at the fastest rate in 20 years. Some 282,800 foreigners moved to the country between 2011 and 2012, marking an increase of 4.1%, double the rate of the year prior" (Ferdman & Yanofsky). This wave of immigrants differs greatly from the *Gastarbeiter* immigration one of the 1950s-1970s in that the latest newcomers are more educated and better trained than their predecessors and can immediately fill Germany's skilled labor shortage.

Many of the current cross-national jobseekers, now officially referred to as *Migranten* (migrants) typically seek employment in Germany's *Mittelstand*, small to mid-size companies, most of which are privately owned and located in rural communities and typically have a business model with very narrow target markets. "Small and midsize companies make up nearly 80% of private-sector employment in Germany" (Blackstone & Fuhmans). A lack of German language skills can often mean the only difference between being hired for a position or not, so the

expectation of employers is that foreign workers in Germany possess the ability to communicate in German. The reality, however, is that typical *Mittelstand* companies lack the staff, time and funds to provide German language courses for prospective foreign employees. The onus, therefore, is on foreign workers to first obtain the necessary German language skills before they join the workforce.

Germans' public perception of immigrants and expectations of migrants' German linguistic skills has changed, too. "A very steady majority, ranging from 92 percent in 2000 to 98 percent in 2008, believed that immigrants living in Germany should speak German" (Abali 7). This view of foreign residents in Germany is widely different from the one which was held during the *Wirtschaftswunder* years when the prevailing attitude of many Germans was that the *Gastarbeiter* were expected to be seen but not heard.

German Adult Education Association (DVV)

The German Adult Education Association is an institution which has been very influential in the instruction of GFL in Germany. Referred to in German as the *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V.* (DVV) or colloquially called the *Volkshochschule*, it incorporates the multilingual language philosophy and communicative language objectives of both the Council of Europe and the EU. The DVV is made up of a network of education centers throughout the country, which offers a large number of courses in such varied fields as basic education, culture, society, the environment, health, and occupations. Established in 1949 and based on data released in 2011, it currently has 929 centers located in cities, towns, and villages throughout the country with an additional 3,126 regional field offices. (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband). Although the DVV has multiple educational aims, this multidisciplinary approach does not limit its influence in GFL. Along with the Goethe Institute, the DVV has been at the forefront of GFL education from the beginning.

Attracted by its well-known reputation, highly trained instructors, and easy accessibility, the DVV is one of the first places people choose to enroll in a language course, particularly foreign residents who seek to improve their German language skills. German-language courses are available during the day and in the evening on both a part-time and full-time basis. The tuition rates are surprisingly inexpensive due to subsidy support from municipal and federal sources. For example, the tuition fee for a two-month long, five-day-a-week, intensive German language course (Level

A1) totaling 200 instruction contact hours at the DVV center in Leipzig comes to only 357 Euros or 1 Euro and 8 cents per hour (254 yen per hour at the date of this paper) (Volkshochschule Leipzig). There is a maximum limit of 15 students per class and students take a placement test upon enrollment which determines the appropriate skills course for them (A1 to C2). Each class level is instructed entirely in the German language and students may advance to the next level only with the instructor's recommendation.

Even before the CEFR came into existence, the DVV began to institute changes to German language instruction after German language specialists recognized that foreign immigrants required assistance with everyday tasks, rather than relying on a traditional language-learning approach, which emphasized studying grammar and translating the works of German literary greats. In 1971, the DVV, along with the Goethe Institute, began a collaborative project, which would lead to the *Zertifikat Deutsch*, a test which assessed the language competences of German language-learners. This test was unique at the time because it tested language learners of German at a level below that of other standard German language tests.

The DVV was already providing its students authentic task-based instruction in German when the CFER came into existence. It was only natural then that the DVV would incorporate the CFER's descriptors into its own German-language curriculum. Now every standard German-language DVV course closely follows the CFER descriptors and nowhere is this more evident than in the textbooks which are aligned to each CFER level. A review of a popular beginning-level German-language textbook for the A1 level used in the DVV covers the following tasks:

- How to address one's German teacher and fellow classmates;
- How to interview for a job;
- How to fill out a work permit form;
- How to ask for particular items in a store;
- How to place an advertisement to sell used items;
- How to apply for *Kindergeld* (governmental child allowance);
- How to order food at a delicatessen;
- How to invite people to birthday parties;
- How to transfer money through a bank;
- How to speak with one's landlord about specific issues and problems;
- How to speak with one's neighbor;

- How to make, change and cancel medical appointments;
- How to report a medical emergency;
- How to book flights, trips on the German train network and car trips with the *Mitfahrzentrale* (car-sharing center);
- How to report a lost item at a train station.

(Lemcke et al. 4-7)

The DVV also gives its instructors flexibility and encourages them to bring in everyday realia in making the designated tasks as “real” as possible for the students so that the ability of performing specific tasks becomes second nature to them. The overall pedagogical goal of the DVV is to prepare students for integration into German society and this is achieved by having them being able to perform everyday tasks reasonably well.

Although the CEFER was adopted by the DVV to help form pedagogical targets for its German language curriculum, the DVV had to create additional tests for each of the six CEFER description levels, because the CEFER does not provide tests for its own descriptors. In order to do this, the DVV formed a subsidiary called the telc, which stands for The European Language Certificates, a not-for-profit organization. “In Germany, telc GmbH is the federal government’s exclusive partner for the language tests taken at the end of the integration courses for migrants. telc certificates are recognized as official proof of German language competence required for obtaining citizenship.” (telc language tests) In addition, many companies use specific telc examination targets for advertising language competence in hiring. The telc implements the CEFER and represents an internationalization of standards, which emphasizes authentic language that takes place outside of the classroom - in other words, language which reflects German-speaking society. “The examinations are fair and objective, offering everyone the same opportunities. At the same time they are also based on the communicative approach, providing not only a piece of paper but also a tool equipping people to communicate in another country, to take part in local life - to actually ‘arrive’” (Milestones 23).

Conclusion

German is a major language in the family of European languages. Any discussion of the German language involves learning more about Europe and the people that live there – their view of multilingualism, the history of the country, the politics, the

economy, and of course, the education system. The German language is intertwined with everything which is European and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the study and potential growth of this language is significant for very modern and pragmatic reasons. This sentiment is shared by many young people throughout Europe, particularly those from southern and central Europe as they are discovering that learning German presents specific economic advantages to them and that superior competence in the language can enhance their employment possibilities. It is this public shift in the perception of German, which makes the future of this language a brighter one, especially when one considers that this positive view is shared by language educators, government ministers and business people throughout Europe.

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