

# Introducing German Dialects in the German as a Second Language Classroom

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## **Abstract**

This brief paper focuses on how German dialects can be introduced in German as a Second Language (GSL) classes through the use of Project Based Learning (PBL) activities. Standard German is the language variety predominately used in German language classrooms across the world, although there are several dialect branches and hundreds of their variants that exist in the German-speaking realm. GSL students should be exposed to and made aware of some of these dialects as they constitute an important part of the language, culture and history of German-speaking countries and language communities throughout the world.

## **Background**

German is a major language in the world. It is a member of the West Germanic group along with English (in all its varieties), Dutch (including Flemish and Afrikaans) and Frisian, in the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Hawkins, 2018). According to Harbert, “the varieties of GE have about 100,000,000 speakers constituting the largest linguistic community in Western and Central Europe” (p. 16). It is the official language of Germany and Austria, Liechtenstein and a co-official language of Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Italian province of South Tyrol, and is also spoken in various overseas communities throughout the world in places that were founded by German-speaking emigrants.

The continental West Germanic continuum encompasses dialectal varieties that differ and are classified on the basis of phonological, morphological and lexical distinctions. Keel mentions that “the West Germanic region roughly encompasses the territory of modern-day Germany, Austria, the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the Netherlands, the northern half of Belgium (Flanders), Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and South Tyrol in northern Italy. The continuum also includes areas of neighboring countries where a variety of German is spoken: the southern border region of Denmark (North Schleswig), as well as enclaves of German in Bohemia (western Czech Republic), Slovenia, Hungary and Romania among others” (p. 737). In all, the German language is composed of roughly up to 250 dialects with significant differences among them that are sometimes so apparent that even native speakers from one region of a country may struggle to understand native speakers from other non-neighboring regions of the same country.

The initial evolution of German dialects came about with the appearance of West Germanic tribes, the Franks, Saxons, Thuringians, Swabians, and Bavarians who settled the areas which now make up Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland (Henriksen & van der Auwera, 2013). Although there is limited information about them and the dialects they spoke due to the fact that they did not leave written records, we do know that the Germanic tribes started to attract the attention of the ancient Romans late in the second century BC when a large group of them encroached on the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire (Todd, 2009). Their dialects were not recognized as a common language chiefly because the various tribes did not constitute an empire like that of the Romans, but their dialectal descendants are still spoken today.

The dialects remained diverse and diverged even more later on sometime between 300 and 500 AD when the Second Germanic consonant shift, which was marked by a series of phonological wave changes, took place principally in the south emanating from what is now Austria and Switzerland. The sound shift reached up into the central area of German speaking areas but did not occur in the north. The dialect group that these sound changes in the south impacted are referred to as High German, while the group that did not undergo changes became known as Low German. High German was so coined because it was originally spoken in the highlands of southern Germany, Austria, the German-speaking area of Switzerland, and Liechtenstein, while Low German was spoken in the low, flat coastal regions of northern Germany bordering the North Sea. There is another dialect group known as Middle or Central German, a linguistic transitional dialect group that falls between High German and Low German, and stretches from the west to the east. This dialect group adopted some of the consonant change features from High German albeit to a lesser degree. Each of these major dialect groups contain many subdialect variants and still do to this day (Henriksen & van der Auwera, 2013).

The creation of a uniform variety of German would finally begin to develop with Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament from Latin, ancient Greek and Hebrew into German in 1522. Before the printing of Luther's Bible, there was no one standard language form in use in the German-speaking realm as everyday communication was made up of a collection of diverse dialects. Before the printing of Luther's Bible, the German language was regarded as too unpolished and unsophisticated to be used for writing even though its diverse dialects formed the language of the common people. While writing the Bible, Luther wrote in Middle German, the language of the royal Saxon court, but was also careful to combine language

elements commonly spoken in High and Low German dialects, which made his translation comprehensible to all German speakers. Due to the then recently invented Gutenberg printing press, the Luther Bible was widely disseminated and became the first standard written reference for everyone living in German-speaking lands regardless of religious affiliation (Kasdorf, 1978).

Germany, at the time Luther translated the Bible, did not yet exist as a political entity but the area in which different forms of the German language were spoken was a hodgepodge of separate kingdoms, principalities and duchies each using their own dialect. After Luther's Bible became the written reference, a gradual development of a standard German form started and eventually pushed back on some dialects, chiefly in the north, which used Low German. This linguistic development accelerated when Germany finally united the ethnic German lands with the exception of Austria and Switzerland in 1871. High German became the language standard of the new empire and also became the language of instruction in its schools. This change was significant. For Low German speakers, whose dialect has been described as being closer to Dutch and English, the switch to High German was akin to learning a new language. The change to Standard German was so thorough that many Germans now consider northerners as speaking the purest form of Standard German with little influence of dialect.

In the southern part of the empire, High German dialects were not as greatly impacted by standardization, however, it would be wrong to assume that there is great uniformity among them due to noticeable differences in their phonology, syntax and lexicon. The scale of those differences cannot compare to those between High and Low German but they are still there. The further away a person travels from one village, town or city, the greater the lack of mutual intelligibility. One need only to hear how people refer to bread rolls, a morning breakfast staple in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, to understand that variations still exist among High German dialects. For example, the Standard German word for a bread roll is "Brötchen" but visitors to Bavaria or Austria will hear the locals call it a "Semmel," or "Weckle," "Weckli" or "Weckerl" in Baden-Wuerttemberg depending on the specific area they are in and "Mutschli" in Switzerland.

In addition to the three written standards of German used in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, there are also many distinct dialects spoken throughout these countries. In Switzerland, for example, the Swiss German dialects are spoken by the majority of the population and are used for informal communication. While Swiss Germans are able to speak Standard German, they often prefer to use their local dialects in everyday life. This can make it difficult for speakers

of Standard German from other regions to understand colloquial conversations in Switzerland. However, despite the variations in dialects and written standards, German is generally considered a relatively uniform language, with mutual intelligibility being relatively high among speakers from different regions.

### **Why teach dialects in the German language classroom?**

There are a few different arguments for and against the teaching of dialects in the German language classroom. The established argument against teaching dialects is that it adds an unnecessary level of complexity for learners and that instructors should focus on teaching Standard German, which is the language variety that is recognized and used in schools, government, media and businesses. This line of thinking suggests that it is more efficient for learners to focus on learning one language variety rather than trying to learn multiple dialects with their lexical, syntactic and phonological differences.

On the other hand, one argument in favor of teaching dialects is that language instruction should reflect the reality of how the language is actually used and that dialects are an important part of the linguistic fabric of the German-speaking countries. This argument suggests that teaching dialects can help students develop their listening and comprehension skills and can provide them with a more authentic language learning experience. Teaching dialects prepares students for the real world by exposing them to ways in which people actually negotiate their daily lives be it in Austro-Bavarian, Swabian, Swiss-German, Viennese German, Zurich German, Plattdeutsch, or Berlin German. Ignoring the existence of dialects denies students an important aspect of the language and culture (Wuensch & Bolter, 2020).

Another argument against teaching dialects in the second foreign language classroom is that they are in danger of disappearing due to increased mobility and urbanization and that they are discouraged in schools and formal settings. This argument is related to the educational reforms which took place in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s when linguists believed that schools should be “dialect free” simply because it would be better for society (Ammon, 1973) to have a “unified language” and that speaking in dialect was indicative of low-class education and therefore should be avoided (Löffler, 1972).

It should be noted, however, that dialects are an integral part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the German-speaking countries and regions, and efforts are being made to revitalize them. There are organizations and initiatives dedicated to promoting the use and understanding

of dialects and some dialects, such as Bavarian and Plattdeutsch, continue to be spoken by a significant number of people. It is difficult to predict the future of German dialects, but it is clear that they will continue to play an important role in the foreseeable future.

### **How to teach dialects in the German language classroom?**

Introducing dialect instruction into the German language classroom can be challenging for instructors, especially for those who are not native speakers of German or who have not had extensive exposure to dialects. However, instructors can overcome these challenges and effectively introduce dialects to their students by using authentic resources such as websites, podcasts or videos to expose students to dialects and provide them with opportunities to practice listening and speaking. This can help to provide a more realistic and authentic language learning experience.

It is true that teaching dialects in the classroom present some challenges, such as a lack of familiarity with the dialects among instructors and difficulty in finding authentic resources. However, it is still possible for instructors to effectively introduce dialects to their students by acting as guides rather than as providers of the language. By implementing PBL activities that allow students to take charge of their own learning, instructors can provide insights, feedback and guidance while also participating in the learning process. This approach can help students to become more engaged and motivated to learn about dialects and can also allow instructors to learn alongside their students. Instructors should keep in mind that the goal of dialect instruction is not for students to become fully conversant in a particular dialect, but rather to become aware of the existence of dialects and to appreciate their rich variety.

PBL can be an effective method for teaching dialects because it allows students to apply their knowledge and skills in a meaningful and authentic context. By assigning specific dialects to small groups and having them research and compare their assigned dialects to Standard German, students can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich variety of German dialects. The objective of using PBL to teach dialects should not be to replace the teaching of Standard German but rather to expose dialects to students as a supplement to their lessons on Standard German. It is also important for instructors to provide students with guidance on which sources of information on dialects are reputable and to assist them with identifying and using authentic resources. Students' knowledge of language is enhanced and they learn about their dialect through PBL's inherent characteristics of collaboration and negotiation of language that is gained from accessing authentic sources and their instructor's language input (Conca, n.d.).

The following list of activities contains the kind of activities that instructors can use for dialect instruction:

- Have students research the pronunciation of conjugated verbs *sein* and *haben* in their designated dialects, compare and contrast them with their Standard German equivalents and share their findings with their classmates;
- Have students count to twenty in their designated dialect, compare and contrast the pronunciation with their Standard German equivalents and share their findings with their classmates;
- Have students explain how tag questions are formed by using several examples in their designated dialect, compare and contrast them with their Standard German equivalents and share their findings with their classmates;
- Have students research vocabulary related to food in their designated dialects, compare and contrast them with their Standard German equivalents and share their finding with their classmates;
- Have students research vocabulary related to animals in their designated dialects and compare and contrast them with their Standard German equivalents, and share their findings with their classmates;
- Have students perform a role play ordering bread rolls at a bakery in their designated dialects, compare and contrast the expressions or pronunciation with their Standard German equivalents and share their findings with their classmates;
- Have students ask and answer questions about the weather in their designated dialects and compare and contrast the expressions with their Standard German equivalents;
- Have students research one assigned utterance in their designated dialect and compare and contrast it with the Standard German equivalent.
- Have higher-level students find their designated dialect in a *Tatort* episode—a long-

running, weekly crime detective drama that is noted for changing cities throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland and is unique for its use of regional dialects. Students can watch short clips of their designated dialect in the drama and discuss them with their classmates.

Overall, PBL activities can be a fun and engaging way for students to learn about and practice German dialects, while also developing their critical thinking and problem solving skills.

### Conclusion

The German language is made up of a rich variety of major dialect branches and their sub-dialects each with their own unique, linguistic characteristics. This richness should be embraced and not dismissed by instructors who teach the language as this would limit students' awareness of how German is actually spoken by many native speakers. By incorporating dialects into the curriculum and using PBL techniques, students can take an active role in their own learning and develop a more comprehensive understanding of German. Overall, learning about dialects can help students develop greater cultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as improved communication skills when interacting with native speakers from different regions. In this way, students learn to appreciate the uniqueness that dialects still play in the modern world and through this process develop a more well-rounded perspective and command of German.

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