Portland State University • German 320

German for the Business and Professional World
Provisional Course Description

Since German 320, "German for the Business and Professional World," is a new course, I want to describe it to you as I conceive it, and I'd like your comments. You can e-mail me (`william@nh1.nh.pdx.edu`), phone me (**725-5285 at PSU, 232-7881 at home**), or just write some ideas on paper and put it in my mailbox (**393 NH**). I'm available during spring vacation, so don't hesitate to get in touch.

Principles

I see this course as the chance for you to assemble the information, skills, and documents that would make you ready to set foot in German-speaking environments where you function as a person who has an individual set of long-term interests and needs beyond the level of just getting through daily living and learning about the country. Perhaps a better title would be "German for the Rest of Your Life."

"Business" language courses often focus on a narrow area of language at a higher level. I don't think most of you want that, and many of you aren't ready for it yet linguistically. I also don't intend to teach German 320 in the manner of a "language class," where a professor, behaving like a professor, gives instruction to students, who behave like students and always have their focus on the next linguistic feature or operation.

Instead, I want to simulate environments in which German might be used as a medium or tool for conducting other activities than learning about language. I also want to treat the concept of "business and professional world" quite broadly, to include the range of pursuits where people need or want to use language for a purpose that fits their special circumstances, whether vocational (job) or avocational (pastime).

Next-to-lastly, I want to emphasize that language learning involves a social activity, as does the use of the language after one has learned it. After all, we learn languages not just to have some bits of knowledge stored in our heads, but also to use that knowledge to communicate with other human beings.

Lastly, we should recognize that such learning involves processes and products. You adopt a method of making progress, attempt to make it, and then show what you have done. Traditional assignments and tests don't seem to contribute much to such learning, but there still have to be ways to motivate learning and evaluate progress.

The Concept of Language Proficiency

Let me put it in the terms of language proficiency, which I hope you have become accustomed to — all that "Intermediate" and "Advanced" stuff I talked about during fall and winter quarters. I want to emphasize the "work" part of the contexts which are the environment for the language levels of Advanced ("Able to satisfy… limited work requirements") and Advanced-Plus ("Able to satisfy most work requirements and show some ability to communicate on concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence").

I believe this focus fits the long-term interests of most of you. If you travel to German-speaking countries, other than for casual tourism, your reasons will likely be some or more or all of the following: 1) you want to work there; 2) you want to pursue some special personal interests there, such as skiing or music, which are particularly characteristic of those countries; 3) as part of living a full life while abroad, you want to continue whatever special personal activities that, like weaving or juggling, make you what you are, as a person rather than just a student, whether or not those activities are particularly "German."

To achieve those goals you will need several kinds of resource and support: 1) language tools — though what and how much you need depends on your current level of proficiency; 2) "real-world" information, such as a list of specialized language reference tools and professional organizations, knowledge of residence and job application procedures, and an understanding of how German can relate to your career and serious personal pursuits; 3) an understanding of what our activities will be and how they should be conducted, because there may be times when you wonder why what we're doing doesn't resemble some other language class you've encountered or pictured to yourself.

Performance and Assessment

If we try to describe the outcomes of the course, we may find it useful to deal with several categories. A grade based on a final exam and some sort of paper sounds pretty ridiculous here, and yet the real world has its standards and evaluations (including some actual "classroom-style" tests, like those for CPA or driver licenses). A grade based on how you carry out certain activities that lead to the intended goals does make sense, but for our course that grade would depend only partly on linguistic progress. It would also depend on the activities you completed and the resources you created for yourself. Example: Your German may be very good, but if the goal is to produce a resumé that can hope to help you get a job, failure to submit a resumé means you don't even get an interview, and a poorly organized and poorly presented resumé likely means someone else gets the job, even if not as well qualified as you. A similar grading policy will help "level the field" with regard to differing levels of language proficiency; there will be no "automatic" A grades for those who happen already to be at Advanced level.

I see 3 categories of activity as being essential to our course:

> 1)   This is a course where we aim specifically to improve language skills, so there should be a conscious knowledge of things that need to be learned and the activities that will help.
> 2)   This is a course where we will engage in the social interactions that have to do with work and serious personal interests, so we should set goals here too, and determine their implications.
> 3)   This is a course where we prepare the resources that will help us achieve something in work or serious personal interests, so we should describe what those resources will be and what they will look like when they are assembled into their finished form.

Here are my ideas about those 3 categories as they relate to our course:

Language development

The range of language skills commonly encountered in third-year German can range all the way from wobbly Intermediate-Mid to nearly Advanced-Plus. As we move toward a standards-based educational system, it is difficult to deny a good grade and credit to someone with a high-level skill, however it has been achieved. And yet it troubles us when effort is not rewarded and lack of effort is not penalized. Secondly, third-year language students do not make the dramatic progress up the proficiency scale that we observe earlier on. If you come into third year as a wobbly Intermediate-High, you may spend all of third year, and maybe longer, at Intermediate High. An Advanced is not likely to become an Advanced-Plus in third year alone. That doesn't mean you're not learning. You can learn to play chess in a few hours. In a few months you can get pretty good at it. But who knows how many years you might take to move from that to a serious competition level?

My suggestion here is that each student, in consultation with me, undertake a distinct jump in performance level in a linguistic feature the student selects, with performance demonstrated in both speaking and writing. Our agreement should consider the linguistic function, the skill area (speaking, writing, etc.), the context, and the level of accuracy. An Intermediate-High might declare: "I want to do past-time narration better, especially in speaking, so I can tell German tourists about Oregon history when I get hired as a group-tour companion." We might then agree that every two weeks you will take a landmark event in Oregon history, work up its vocabulary (especially verb tenses), maybe find an interesting picture that relates to it, and then record a two-minute narration, with follow-up correction and re-recording. An outstanding performance might be a videotape of you at the historical site doing the tourist-guide bit for the camera. This would exceed expectations, could go into a job application, and would simulate the actual work environment.

Social interaction

An article about science I read recently declared that "knowledge always goes with people," meaning that knowledge is not conveyed or acquired without some sort of personal communication. Very few jobs or personal-interest activities are conducted truly independently of other people. In our hobbies, at least, if not so much in our work, we feel that we can "get ahead" better by helping each other rather than working behind barriers or actively undermining other people. This course will work better if partner and group activities are essential to it. Those activities should resemble the activities of our real world: team planning sessions, job interviews, tutorials, show-and-tell sessions, performance evaluations. People who

do not participate in those activities are not regarded as capable co-workers or co-hobbyists, however articulate they may be in the abstract. Moreover, we like to think, despite Dilbert, that in the real world those who claim more prestige and rewards should do different things, do more things, and do it all better than the others; they should be leaders, not just somewhat better at the same tasks.

Resources and documentation of performance

In this category, too, we can derive the nature and amount of what is needed by asking some "real-world" questions. To be ready to seek decent employment or rewarding personal-interest experiences in a German-speaking environment, what aids should one have assembled and what else must one be able to present to certify that one is qualified? The business world says that job applicants need such things as resumés, letters of inquiry, and even professional portfolios. Most would agree that we could not establish contact with people who share our serious personal interests without being able to communicate with them at some length about the shared topic. In both work and serious play we also need to know the tools of our trade: reference sources, contact lists, etc. And for our purposes there is the language element: we need to be able to document our language ability and improvement in a way that others can tell whether to hire us or invite us to join their serious avocational group.

the final product

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. What you create for category 3 is where you show how well you have done; but what you do for category 3 must show what you have accomplished in categories 1 and 2. I envision such a collection or "portfolio" to include:

> contracts with me about what you will do
> a log of activities and a reflective journal in English
> evaluations by me
> documentation of writing and speaking skills
> "tools of the trade" — list of resources (organizations/people; language reference works), etc.

What would be sufficient documentation of language skills in terms of being qualified for serious employment or personal-interest activity? Probably something like the following:

> a paragraph-style resumé
> a letter of inquiry about a job or activity
> a well-developed specialized vocabulary and phrase list
> a speech recording with written evaluations by you and an authority
> proof of special knowledge (project — text or tape/video)
> a statement about why it is you that should get the opportunity to do X

It should not be surprising that you already have a head start on some of those portfolio activities. That's one of the ways we've been building toward the course during fall and winter.

Stages of the course

In German 301 and 302 we worked chapter by chapter, with each week or "chunk" of coursework being pretty much like the others. In German 320 we leave "the book" mostly behind and undertake activities that are supposed to have some actual counterpart in reality. That requires a course with distinct stages, according to where we are in its various processes: planning, working at the main tasks, wrapping up. Below are outlines of the stages as I see them; bear in mind that many activities will overlap stages.

task-formulation stage (2 weeks)

> "intake" interview for personal background, skills, interests, life plan — conducted by you, not me, with each other
> select job options: au pair, language teacher, waiter, lifeguard, tour guide
> select hobby scenarios: accompany visiting honored expert; acquire advanced on-site skill in mundane environment; shoot the wad on the hobby trip of a lifetime; create a product
> propose language-progress steps
> propose special-interest project
> contracts with me
> set up portfolio
> form groups to hold everyone to task
> learn office and work group terminology
> decorate office (cartoon boards, etc.) and establish party fund
> create early-quarter speech samples
> "Lebenslauf" (personal-professional autobiography and goals statement)

project stage (6 weeks)

- assemble specialized vocabulary
- assemble "tools of the trade" (specialized dictionaries, etc.)
- "routine" writing (letters of inquiry, etc.)
- produce special-interest project

documentation stage (2 weeks + finals week)

- assemble language sample documentation (speaking)
- polish special-interest project
- revise written language samples
- have exit language evaluation to show progress over the quarter
- put portfolio in final form

Our environment

It will be important to establish a "classroom" atmosphere that is not that of the usual classroom, though underneath it we will still know that it's a language classroom with instructor and students. The environment will depend on the people, the place, and the activities. During fall and winter I encouraged changes in classroom identity and behavior, with *some* success. One day, for example, we drew maps and genealogies for the Midwestern farm family whose German letter we were reading. Your task was not directly to learn language, and I functioned as a sort of facilitator and resource person.

We can improve that by attention to the physical surroundings, the ways we group ourselves, and the tasks we set ourselves. Particularly important will be: 1) moving from a teacher-centered to a group- and student-centered environment; 2) changing the way our classroom looks; 3) making less definite the boundaries between learning in class and learning outside, and also between what is learned and what is not learned, by whom it is learned and who determines that. People will be doing different things at different times and in different ways, and instead of learning or not learning specific things assigned by a teacher and evaluated in some mysterious way, you will be determining much of what you should do and learn, and will be involved in assessing your performance. It will be a good idea to plan ahead for some feelings of uncertainty.

our identities

I hope you can switch your identity from "student" to the "real" you — someone who has career and personal interests and wants to further them. To make that work you will have to become confident that to do so will improve your German, more than a straight "academic" approach. As I have done occasionally during fall and winter quarters, I will change my identity from "professor" to a combination of office boss, career office advisor, and personal skills counselor. Instead of saying, "Learn this, and learn it because it's for a grade," I will try to say (in German, though), "Don't you think it would help to…?" (look at Powell's or the library for a specialized vocabulary book, read up on this career or that German city, find a German company's site on the Web, listen to this tape of job interviews, rewrite your resumé with more about your job experience).

our "work space"

I've made clear how much I dislike the conventional classroom, with its lousy acoustics, bare walls, inconvenient seating, and lack of technology. Even the "Dilbert" office is not such an obstacle to a human(e) work atmosphere. I'd like to have seating that encourages group activity and consciousness and de-emphasizes the space and role of the instructor (something other than front of room, near board, facing neat rows of people who see themselves as students). We'll need work materials and flat surfaces so we can write and talk in groups rather than by ourselves. I suppose it's too much to hope for that we can decorate our space with some pictures and other "props" of the human workspace. Telephones, file cabinets, and a water cooler (for office gossiping) are out of the question. I am toying with the idea of a portable office bulletin board where we could post our funny work-related cartoons ("Hägar der Schreckliche"), jokes ("Wieviele Deutschprofessoren müssen daran arbeiten, eine Glühbirne auszuwechseln?"), and personal notices ("Kann jemand meine Schicht am Wochenende übernehmen, mit Kinderpflege als Gegenleistung?").

I'll do what I can to create that spirit in our room — by which I mean our regular classroom, the one we are assigned in the course catalog. But I'm also taking steps to get us another work space, and here I am repeating something I have already done in my first-year German course. If all goes well, I will reserve for us, one day a week, one of the computer labs

(most likely CH322),which will become our "office" — a place where we do, in an intensive way, what it is we do when we are truly behaving as though we were not in a "German class." There, for instance, you will put your German resumé in final printed form, and speak German while you learn (or teach!) word-processing.

That may sound exciting, but you may find too that it strains you — specifically the part about maintaining the use of German while you try to carry out some real-world task. This may be the time when the "penalty for English" kitty gets a lot of nickels, dimes, and quarters. I remember when I was 19 (summer of 1967!) and was working in the "Auslandsabteilung" of a German bank. Sure, the employees there had had their many years of English classes, as had my roommates in the German equivalent of the YMCA where I stayed in Köln. I had had two years of high-school German and two more years in college (though not a real third-year course). But, you know, even though our department at the Deutsche Bank handled a lot of English business communication, they never spoke English with me. Not only was our office a place where German was spoken because we were in Germany; I am convinced that my spoken German, such as it was, was better than their spoken English.

So I had to make it in German there, in a place where, yes, everyone thought it was nice that this young Amerikaner could speak German, but also where they had to take care of business as usual, which meant that I had to fit in or else. I hope we can create in our course an atmosphere where German is truly the "working language." In everyday terms that means that you can't just turn to me or someone else and say, "Wie sagt man auf deutsch 'delete'?" Instead, you will have to say, auf deutsch, what it is you want to do, and then hope someone has a word for you. I bet the "no English!" party fund will get a lot of nickels and dimes early on! Perhaps the container can also serve as a "cuss box."

our learning materials

There is no existing textbook for such a course, and maybe it would be impossible anyway. By this time the learning must be tailored to the individual, the learner must take over more responsibility for finding learning resources, and a "real-world" course should use real materials. But while much would be determined individually, some materials will be more or less identical. Everyone will certainly need a good dictionary, and probably a reference grammar. I will show some examples, but part of the course includes finding and evaluating your own resources. I will also distribute some text and tape materials, since I doubtless have a better collection than you do. But you will be expected to come up with some materials too, especially when we get to your personal-interest activities. Some resources you may get from the Internet, and some you will hunt up in print. Much more judgment will be left up to you than is customary in language courses, but life will be like that too if you end up using languages in your career or avocation.

Our learning materials will be determined individually in another sense. Each of you has different language strengths and needs. A single vocabulary list or grammar exercise distributed to everyone would actually suit very few. Often we may well all work with the same materials (such as a rental contract, residence permit application, or fringe-benefits pamphler), but what you create with those materials will differ individually, as will the language you learn using them.

I expect that one of our standard patterns will be a worksheet that begins with a task description and then has — because I provide it or because our groups create it by discussion — a list of stages to carry out and check off. As part of your learning you would decide what resources you needed and would take the steps necessary to obtain them. Of course I would not be nasty about providing things if you asked me about them, but you should learn how to find what you need too.

our group behavior

It's not easy to change from a "classroom" attitude to a "real-world" behavior pattern. You've already seen that in fall and winter. Part of the difficulty is linguistic, and part of it is psychological: the relationships among people are different, and so is the way you look at what you are and do.

Two major changes will occur in how we act. You will be expected to cooperate even more with each other, and in different ways. You will be helping each other learn more, and thus will need to be reliable. We may need to move people around so that the different ability levels can mix more, so that other abilities can cooperate, such as strengths in art, people management, or technology, and so that people who are having difficulty do not stick together and reinforce each other's weakness. "Loners" will need to get more gregarious, and those whose German is already

pretty good and think that mixing with others of lesser proficiency will slow them down will need to realize that helping out others will probably challenge and thus improve their good German.

In class you will be using more skills at the same time, and you will not be doing so much of the usual "study" activities. For example, you will be asked to read and talk at the same time, as you would in real life when you have to figure out an obscure government form or a complicated news story. You will be writing more in class, and by this I mean such things as "real-world" note-taking: jotting down notes for the purpose of communication rather than recording linguistic information about German itself.

More learning will take place outside class, and it will be of a more varied kind. You will be doing some field work, be using the computer labs, and be putting together your language portfolio. You will have to be confident that such activities will also improve your German.

One of the toughest and yet perhaps most rewarding parts will be maintaining German as the only language of communication during class. It is time to quit looking to English for a refuge. You are now at the point where I should be able to tell you everything I need to say in German, where you can find out all the "real-world" information you need to know by asking in German, where you can say all you need to say (eventually) by speaking German, and where you can learn what you need to know about the language by question, description and example. Plenty of immigrants to America who are no more proficient in English than you are in German manage to live their lives and learn more English that way. I was serious when I suggested a "party kitty" to be collected from voluntary fines for using English except when citing individual words, and even then we should be strict. It would be OK to say, "Im Deutschen sagt man nur 'ich gehe,' auch wenn man im Englischen 'I am going' sagt." But we should levy a fine for cop-outs like "Wie sagt man auf deutsch 'I was going?'" I'll bring along quarters to pay my fines, but I'll bet I won't spend many.

some serious questions

This course could be very rewarding, but there are some tough questions to ask, of you and of me:

• Can you work independently on individual development so that I don't have to spell out everything for everyone separately?

• Can you cease being "students" of "German" and instead, though in a class, behave like real people who are doing something other than sitting in a language classroom?

• Can you be convinced that you are learning German even if the activity you are engaged in seems to be more "about" something else?

• Can you put up with the frustration that comes when you have to use German no matter what?

• Can your co-workers depend on you to be there, in class or wherever you are needed, and ready with your share of the task?

• Can I manage to turn around your work promptly so that you can get to the next stages? Perhaps I should make that part of my "party fund" fine policy.

But enough of the doubts and questions. I think we can turn German 320 into an outstanding class. One reason I think so is that our group this year has been a friendly and enthusiastic one. I hope you'll let me know what you think, and I will sincerely try to accommodate your wishes.