

Dr. Fischer's Personal Advice about What to Do Next in Your Language Study

answering request for advice from daughter in college who had 4 years of Latin, 3 of German, and 2 of French in high school, but didn't take a language her freshman year in college

Sweetheart,

Now for the advice you requested. I'm so flattered after all these years that you're actually asking me for advice. But all advice has to be tempered by realizing that it may be given from the perspective of the advice-giver, who usually approaches it this way: what would I advise myself to do? I'll try to advise you, rather than myself.

There are several factors to consider initially.

1) The difference between how you learn (or think you learn) a language, and how I view the process as a professional teacher of languages. We disagree. In the following I'll try to remain neutral. 2) Why do you want to learn the language and why do you want to take the course (real proficiency? love of grammar? love of culture? need the credits? admire the teacher? relative availability at this or this time or institution? others?). 3) How the course is taught, and the quality of the teaching. (If you really really want heavy grammar of the conscious, analytical type, then don't take my class, because you won't get that and you may fail to benefit from what I actually do - unless you get me to talk to you outside class about grammar, which is in fact one of the passions of my life, at least as far as intellectual stuff goes.)

Given all that, here we go. If the student, the teacher and the course are aiming at actual proficiency, only so much can be gained in so much time, no matter how hard all of you work at it. A crude analogy: toilet-training cannot be hurried; less crudely: successful weight loss cannot be hurried, though anyone can steam off a few water-pounds in a couple hours (temporarily).

Considering your intellect and Sitzfleisch (=patience), both of which you owe in large measure to my genes, and assuming you have only limited outside commitments, if you're in a grammar-driven course you can indeed cram a year into a summer. Though we are acquainted with [teacher] in a more than passing way, I really don't know how she teaches, and I don't even know whether she's the one teaching this summer.

As for German, meine kleine Signorina (I'm alluding to a bilingual hit tune of the past by Vico Toriani, the Swiss equivalent of Perry Como): The issue is not whether or not you need review, and we've got a real problem with level here, whether you are going for grammar or actual proficiency. Again considering your intellect, if the course you take is grammar-driven, it will take you all of a

couple of study sessions to dust off the rust, especially since, if you take second-year college German, you will be in a class with a lot of people who were never too strong on the grammar to begin with, and maybe also never too strong on the actual proficiency. Continuing that line of thought, the same principle applies here as for [other language]: in a summer you can acquire an entire year of grammar-driven course content.

But - assuming I am doing my job right and my staff behaves when I'm not checking every moment - don't come to PSU for a died-in-the-wool grammar-driven second-year German course. I'm not sure there are any other second-year courses around here in the summer, either. There still is no decent second-year book (I'm working on that), so our staff may have to use one of the available texts, and so you could get some conscious grammar from that (but it will be the grammar you already know, probably). And the person who teaches the course will be doing her best to teach the real language, though she will of course indulge any special interests of earnest learners, especially if the last name is Fischer. Actually, I think you'd really like her, and if you are still considering it, ask me for more info.

If you're looking for actual proficiency in German, that second-year course might be of value to you. When it comes down to it, good students take responsibility for the large part of their learning. (And when it comes down to it, bad students, are responsible for a large part of what they fail to learn.) From what I can tell from the little I've heard and read from your German, your writing proficiency is at the upper end of what some second-year college students produce, or within the range of what we encounter in a garden-variety third-year group. Your speaking proficiency is similar to that of my best true-beginner exiting first-year students (but also comparable to that of many ordinary second-year students and not a few third-year students). You outrank most of them, though, in your receptivity for language; I take some credit here, not least because of all the times I sang Schubert to you while I changed your diapers. Occasionally you cooed along in something that resembled German or English.

A complicating factor, though not so problematic for such a short term as a summer, is that you are a fast and obedient learner. Even in a short summer course, you might come into a group

on the low end, only to surge past the mass of others and zoom out the top end. So don't place yourself too low.

Here's (or "are") the last two caveats: 1) where will you be taking these new skills and credits after you return to Williams College? and 2) what do you really want to accomplish with your language learning, long-term (as in profession, let alone your satisfaction with Life itself)?

If the Williams courses in this or that language are grammar-driven and you want to fit in (never mind what other goals you have for your language study), then make your choice with that in mind. If they are grammar-driven, I'll bet you can gain a year's grammar in a summer just studying on your own. If they are proficiency-oriented, then, again, make your choice with that in mind. But you will not be able to gain a year's proficiency in a summer just studying on your own, in the conventional "book" manner. It doesn't work that way, any more than you can lose weight by reading a book about losing weight, even if you memorize the whole book.

All of that considered, I recommend first (as I tell every such inquirer) that you go to the horse's mouth and ask the instructors of the summer classes what they do and how they think it fits your needs. (I'll supply contact info on request.). If your chosen interest is Italian, "da bin ich mit meinem Latein zu Ende" ("I've shot my bolt", "I'm out of advice"), since I know nothing more about what's going on there.

If it's German you want more, then here's the nutshell advice (=kurzgefaßt): don't waste your time on any second-year course, whether it's grammar-driven or proficiency-oriented. If you really want a solid German experience in Portland this summer, let's see whether we can cram you into the Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik still, maybe even with some special registration stuff that they will probably assent to because I'm your old man and because you are you and they always need decent students, even if they are commuters. Those folks will give you both the fluency and the grammar. But we'll have to discuss how that affects your summer job situation.

As for what any language will contribute to your career and pleasure in life: Wise people tell us that most folks, when they look back on their lives, perhaps shortly before death, never say "I wish I had spent more time on my job and profession," but that many deeply regret not having spent more time and effort with family and friends. I like to think your mother and I have applied that principle in our balance of profession and family in our lives. Perhaps you could allude to that at my memorial service (not that I'm expecting that to happen soon).

Back to my point: I cannot imagine you will get a job where your sole function is Professional Grammarian of Foreign Languages. But your profession and personal life may require (or just be enriched by) a practical and perhaps high-level competence in one or more other languages. We (even I) are/am pretty sure that high-level competence involves conscious knowledge of grammar. But the competence that happens along the way, and the actual manifestation of competence at the highest levels, requires actual capability to use the language in real time.

Should you actually become manager of the Portland Opera, you won't need to pass a 20-item test where you write Italian participles in blanks, or explain how they are formed. Should you sing seriously in chorus in Germany and have to discuss with the director and your fellow musicians how you are to sing this or that passage, you won't have to transform a passage of factual statements into a list of wishes in the subjunctive. Instead, you'll have to come up with the necessary language on the spot; high-level grammar will help, but only if you can apply it ("Damn! I thought it was g-major. I should have sung a c-sharp.")

Think about the difference between [female family friend who is a Japanese teacher of English] and [male Japanese who taught music to the kids]. She "knew" a lot about English grammar, but was still very faltering in speech. He knew relatively less (though still a lot) about English grammar, but he could use a greater proportion of what he knew. His speaking skills were far better than hers; his writing skills were about the same; his listening skills were far better; and I would guess he was as good at reading the language. He also got a lot more out of the culture around him.

Enough paternal and professorial advice. I'm counting the days till you will be here. I'm proud and happy that you are becoming an educated adult. But I miss you horribly and, with your growth and the passage of time in my own life, sense even more my own mortality. Ask me sometime about when (there were several Whens) Death sent me the wake-up messages that have formed me (along with the messages about Life that have formed me too).

With all my love, Little One who once fit so joyfully into just the crook of my left arm while I warmed for you a bottle of your mother's so very rich milk and felt so blessed to give it to you (except for the one night when she was away and I couldn't do anything to make you anywhere near happy or even quiet and kept offering both you and me what I thought were our respective favorite beverages),

Dad