

AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS IN THIRD YEAR GERMAN

by Ursula Lawson

Students who continue their German studies beyond the second year should be provided with skills enabling them to use the language for oral and written communication. This calls for a different approach in teaching a third year class. After two years of study, the student has had some training in listening to and speaking of German, he has "had" grammar and may have worked through various literary and scientific offerings with the help of paperback dictionaries. We, who are charged with the teaching of the language, however, know how "foreign" German remains for most students.

How then can we get the student to feel at home in the language and learn to use it as a tool for true self-expression? To achieve this goal the classroom situation must eliminate the atmosphere of artificiality and the feeling of learning in the abstract. The student should be given the opportunity to get involved with German as a living experience. It is the instructor's task to let the student be creative and active in shaping his own learning process in and out of the classroom. Strong motivation must be supplied to the learner to broaden and strengthen his language skills voluntarily and to shape these skills with his fellow students.

The Language Lab

After years of experimentation in search of an effective method for the teaching of advanced German, the full utilization of our language laboratory facilities finally provided my students with a variety of learning experiences which resulted in the attainment of the above stated goals. This is attested to by the students' written course evaluations and born out through the quality of examinations and papers. Most of the participants in the course were not German majors. The announced intention of making the showing of commercial films from Germany the focal point of the year's work was probably responsible for the enrollment of students from various fields of study. Since films for German are often difficult to understand for the average American student with only two year's training, I decided to spend the fall quarter preparing the students for the

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winter quarter's film presentations. All language skills had to be improved because the films were to be the object of intensive discussion and study; listening comprehension, oral and written expression had to receive equal attention.

Although only German was spoken in the classroom, additional listening practice was needed. Each week a new tape program was placed in the language laboratory for the students. The following materials were used for this purpose: short newspaper articles, fairy tales, anecdotes and poems. It was left to the discretion of the students to listen to the tapes as they saw fit, but comprehension of the weekly offerings was checked either by a quiz in class, by class discussion or by written homework. The content matter of the tapes was available only in the lab, and students were encouraged to have paper and pencil on hand while listening.¹ The taped poems were available all quarter, however, and written copies of them had been given to the class. Each student was to choose one poem, memorize it, and recite it to the class by the end of the quarter as a part of the final examination. In the evaluation of the individual oral presentation the correctness of pronunciation and enunciation, as well as the expressiveness with which the poem was recited, was of importance.

Oral practice always seems to be the most difficult problem to solve in a third year class. Students are usually reluctant to speak freely unless they have been in Germany or come from a German speaking family. However, it is absolutely essential to get all students to express themselves in German, in order to strengthen and enlarge their vocabulary and to develop the proper use of grammar. Since too many corrections of the spoken German tend to inhibit and discourage the weaker students, written exercises are a better vehicle for the necessary grammar corrections. For improvement of pronunciation and intonation, work in the language laboratory seems to be best suited.

Organization

As the basis for class discussion we used *Konfrontation*² as a text. This was supplemented by selective individual readings of newspaper and magazine articles. At the beginning of the quarter, I asked the students to give me a list of the chapters they wished to read and

¹Sometimes, especially at the beginning of the quarter, the tapes contained a very brief paragraph, spaced for dictation to be written by the students and collected in class.

²Duncan Smith, *Konfrontation Themen aus der deutschen Presse* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972)

discuss in this text.³ The reading list was based upon these preferences, and two class periods (out of four) each week were set aside for class discussion dealing with the chosen topics. If we needed more information, I assigned pertinent additional reading on an individual basis from German as well as English sources to enrich our knowledge of the topic.

One of these weekly discussion periods was moved from the classroom to a quiet local family bar after the course was running smoothly. I found that the informal atmosphere of the bar helped to loosen the tongues and give the young people the feeling of being in a more natural environment for conversation and discussion than that of a campus classroom. We usually sat at two or three tables close together, and I moved from one group to the other. The pledge to speak German was kept at all times.

Another class meeting each week was held in the language laboratory during the first two thirds of the fall quarter. We often started this hour with the repeated reading of the selected paragraph (either from the textbook or from a mimeographed sheet) in order to practice certain difficult sounds in the German language. The repetition permitted me to listen to each student and to correct pronunciation. We then looked at selected slides or a filmstrip accompanied or followed by taped questions which were answered simultaneously and individually by the students. Again I was free to monitor and correct students on an individual basis. After the class had become accustomed to talking spontaneously in their booths, we also experimented with slides of abstract paintings. The students were asked to give their response (description as well as interpretation) to the painting. This exercise turned out to be particularly interesting and revealing for me, and the students enjoyed it. Our work in the language laboratory minimized the need for constant corrections during the class discussions, thus reducing the inhibitions preventing the free flow of conversation.

Learning Centered Class

As the students developed language skills and gained confidence in their ability to express themselves in German, the initiative for the class activities was gradually shifted from instructor to students. Each member of the class was asked to prepare a slide show with five to ten slides selected either from our collection in the laboratory or from the

³The students chose the following chapters from the book: "Amerika aus deutscher Sicht," "Das ewig Weibliche" and "Die Verpestung der Umwelt."

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student's own slides. The pictures were to illustrate a clearly recognizable topic emerging during the viewing in class. Once the topic was identified (sometimes through repeated showing), the student in charge led the discussion dealing with each picture and its relationship to the topic.

Programs presented included:

Baroque castles in Germany
Accidents do happen
Christmas
Revolution
War

Portraits of children
Modes of travel
German sports
A German city
A topography of Germany

Our second project for the quarter was the planning and performances of a playlet by groups of students. The hand puppets bought by our language director in Germany were used with great success. The plays were based either on fairy tales, plays or stories. The productions were highly amusing and entertaining. Since the student players could hide behind their puppets, they unfolded their imagination freely. We even had "commercials." One group decided to create a radio program instead of a puppet play. It turned out to be a hilarious satire on campus life. All students wrote their play and gave the script to me for corrections before the performance. They wanted to be sure that everything would go as smoothly as possible. Needless to say, the students learned a great deal while doing this project. The grouping of the class for this work was left to the students. I only recorded the names of each group (well ahead of the performance) in order to set the dates for the class presentations. In the evaluation made by the students at the end of the course, students mentioned again and again how valuable the group work had been, not only because of the satisfaction derived from being creative in German, but also for the opportunity to become acquainted with their fellow class members.

To avoid confusion and wasted time, it is necessary to give students a schedule of the dates for the presentations well in advance. The slide shows can be arranged in groups of three for one class period. The sequence of presentation should be arranged in such a way that students with imagination and self-confidence are chosen to participate on the same day as those who are shy or hesitant. The success of such class periods depends upon personality as well as ability of the students in charge. If the least interesting presentation is in the middle of the period, and the class gets off to a good start

this helps the duller part of the schedule. An interesting program at the end of the hour, of course, tends to preserve the audience's attention.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the fall quarter's work, the students, to my surprise, expressed their desire and need for more frequent grammar reviews. They also felt that the slide presentations should not be given in succession without interruption by other activities, but should be spaced to avoid monotony resulting from too much uniformity of activity. On my part, I was somewhat dissatisfied with the large variety of material used in the language laboratory sessions, because the vocabulary to which the students were exposed was uncontrolled. This resulted from choosing the materials primarily for their appeal to the interests of the students. I therefore decided to select next year's materials more carefully in regard to vocabulary so that it will enrich the students' knowledge of German in a more systematic fashion, particularly in the area of everyday life such as housing, shopping, modes of travel, etc. Thus next year's fall quarter will present new challenges and, hopefully, added improvement.

The Second Quarter

For the second quarter's viewing of German films the following goals determined the methods of approach for our work:

- 1) utilization of the films as source material for the understanding of German life and culture
- 2) utilization of the films as source material for the improvement of German language skills
- 3) development of an awareness of the film as an art form.

As an introduction, the students had to learn to "read" the visual syntax of a film. We discussed the difference between reality and art in general, as well as the aspects of the film "language." At the same time, concepts germane to the movie medium were defined, thus equipping the students with the necessary German terminology for the analysis and interpretation of the films. The preparatory phase was concluded with an outline of elements of the film language and their meaning. The symbolic significance of cinematic manipulation of time and space, the impact of language, gesture and mimic as clues to the central idea underlying the film. Relationships between the characters in a film and their attitudes toward institutions of society and state were pointed out as possible objects for study of life and customs in Germany in a given historical period. At the same time, a warning was given against dangerous generalizations in our future discussions.

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We were now ready to see our first film. The mechanics of presenting the movies were as follows: we saw each film in two class periods. It was necessary to start the reel very punctually because of the length of these reels (two reels of 50-60 minutes for each film). In addition to the showings during the regular classes, we saw each film in its entirety twice in the evening. A tape was made of the film's sound track and made available to the students in the language laboratory. The multiple showing of the films is an absolute necessity if they are to be utilized in the above-mentioned manner. The evening attendance was on a voluntary basis, of course, but the students took full advantage of the opportunity to become as familiar as possible with the movie. Notes were taken during the film showing and while listening to the sound track. The latter activity was designed for the collection of vocabulary and idioms to be discussed and clarified in class meetings.

Use of the Film

Kurt Hoffmann's "Wir Wunderkinder" (1958) based upon Hans Hartung's novel started our film series. This movie is particularly suited for use in the classroom. The plot ranges in time from 1913 to the "Wirtschaftswunder" (Economic Wonder) of the post World War II period. In setting it encompasses life in the village, the small town and the large city; it contrasts the areas of north and south Germany. Its historical aspects alone provide enough curiosity—and consequently stimuli—for a thorough inquiry concerning the political developments of 20th century Germany. The character portrayals, while frankly romantic and tempered with satire, offer a wealth of insight into German mores and customs. Basic types of societal interaction are touched upon—from the celebration of a national holiday to a wedding and a funeral. Relationships between men and women, parents and children, employer and employees, as well as state and individual are shown, providing a veritable gold mine for the student of German attitudes and deportment. . Although the film is full of colloquialism, idioms, Nazi terminology, and other interesting expressions (presenting a definite challenge to the foreigner struggling with problems of comprehension), the film's satirical-humorous approach, coupled with its aesthetic conception, is nevertheless so enjoyable that it arouses the student's desire to comprehend more fully in order to understand the subtleties of the plot and the "insider's jokes."

Our first task after having seen the film three times, was a review of the plot. Although there are always some students who do not quite understand certain parts of the action in these films, other

students can usually explain these portions. At times, I had to help out with brief explanations. While summarizing and clarifying the film's plot, the students took notes, supplementing those they already had from the viewing of the movie. A description of the action had to be handed to me as a homework assignment later. Before the summary was due, however, we investigated the language. From repeated listening to the sound track the students made a collection of vocabulary which we reviewed and analyzed in class. The lists were supplemented with synonyms, antonyms, cognates and additional idioms as the occasion warranted. New vocabulary was linked to known vocabulary in this manner, and I took the opportunity, whenever possible, to point out synonyms belonging to different language strata.

For example:

pennen - schlafen - schlummern
verrecken - sterben - dahinscheiden

Of course, it is impossible to categorize speech patterns and assign them an absolute place in the different types of German language usage. A thorough analysis of the film's dialogues was out of the question for third year students, but an awareness of the main categories had to be established since "Wir Wunderkinder" abounds in satire, irony and wit. Puns are not infrequent, and without rudimentary understanding of the complexity of usage the students would not even realize the existence of an essential part of the film, not to mention the mistakes made in written language by virtue of the wrong choice of words.

After these preparations, we were ready to discuss the most important events which determined the course of history in Germany during this century. We briefly outlined the types of government the Germans had and tried to clarify the reasons for the emergence of each in turn. I encouraged the students to read (in German and English) books and articles dealing with recent German history. In class we attempted to capture the essence of each of the periods through interpretation of the scenes, the actions or reactions of the characters, as well as the symbolic presentations appearing within the spatial and temporal framework of the movie.

The students and I regretted that our time for discussing "Wir Wunderkinder" was cut short by the arrival of the second movie. We even had to postpone the collection of sociological data on "Wunderkinder" until we had seen the second film, "Film ohne Titel;" It was fortunate that both of these movies dealt with the period between 1945 to 1955. Of course, each of the films exhibited a very different intent; action and character portrayal were dissimilar, and "Film

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ohne Titel," lacking political content, offered more material for a study of German life and attitudes. It was rather interesting to discover the students' insights into the various types of relationships between the characters and their convictions in regard to social and political values on the basis of these German films. To supplement the knowledge planned from the two movies I referred the students to a number of articles in German newspapers and magazines on the social problems we were discussing. A summary of one or two articles had to be handed in as homework.

Before the third film arrived we had to concern ourselves with the aesthetics of the first two. We compared their conception, intent and execution. The approach used to move into this sphere was a solicitation of value judgment from members of the class followed by a request for explanations based upon aspects of each movie. The structure of the two films, matters of selection and sequence of scenes, of transition and the relationship of the scenes to one another and to the film as a whole. The cinematic means of creating moods, their significance, the manipulation of time and space, the quality and meaning of the multi-leveled dialogues as building blocks shaping the film in its totality were studied. Some students were able to contribute special technical knowledge in regard to film making which proved to be very helpful.

Exams

Meanwhile the time for mid-term examination had arrived. I gave the class a selection of topics dealing with various elements of the films (aesthetic, political and sociological) asking for an expression of a personal reaction to one of the topics in the essay. The tests reflected the enthusiasm of the class as well as considerable skills in written German. I therefore saw no reason to change our method of approach in the second half of the term during which we saw "Berlin-Alexanderplatz" and "Helden." The final examination was a research paper in German whose topic was chosen by each student. The assignment was to research the background of one of the aspects exhibited by one film seen during the quarter and report on the results. Each student had to discuss his chosen topic and its outline with me by a given date, well before the end of the term. I was able to assist in the search of material and give advice concerning the scope and organization of the paper. All of us felt that the educational goals we had set for ourselves had been reached within the range of individual differences.

The success of the winter quarter was due to the very fortunate availability of the films and their date of arrival. It is always a matter

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of chance which films one gets and at what time they can be sent. In this way, each course taught with films as a teaching aid presents the instructor with new challenges and avoids the danger of routine.

Conclusion

The full utilization of our language laboratory's facilities and the integration of a variety of audio-visual aids into the third-year's German instruction definitely enriched the learning experience of the students and solved the difficult problem of breaking the block most students have when confronted with the desire and the need for expressing their thoughts and feelings in a foreign language. Audio-visual aids as tools for self-improvement, especially for oral usage, proved to be a valuable substitute for those students not fortunate enough to have lived and traveled for some time in Germany.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Dr. Ursula Lawson is an Associate Professor of German in the Modern Languages Department of Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.*

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