

# English and foreign language teaching in the German Gymnasium

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*The paper offers a survey of the present system of teaching languages, focusing on English language, at German grammar schools (Gymnasien). In doing so, it addresses institutional structures, curriculum, teaching methods, the role of media, standards and assessment results, teacher education, and future perspectives. The aim is to clarify what makes such schools successful in language teaching and, without encouraging imitation, as all education systems are different, identify the key success factors in institutional language learning in the secondary sector.*

**KEYWORDS:** *gymnasium, grammar school, English language, language teaching*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Germany has a worldwide reputation for language proficiency, particularly in English. This is in part due to the quality of language education in its school system, especially *Gymnasien* and grammar schools. To understand how a nation masters foreign languages, one needs to understand how an education system organises itself in order to deliver that quality. This paper offers a survey of the present system of teaching languages, focusing on English language, at German grammar schools (*Gymnasien*). In doing so, it addresses institutional structures, curriculum, teaching methods, the role of media, standards and assessment results, teacher education, and future perspectives. The aim is to clarify what makes such schools successful in language teaching and, without encouraging imitation, as all

education systems are different, identify the key success factors in institutional language learning in the secondary sector.

## 2. RESEARCH SITUATION

The current state of research into the role of English as a foreign language at German *Gymnasium* is anything but satisfactory. There are hardly any up-to-date, valid, reliable, and representative studies on this topic. A first problem is that contributions concerned with different school types and educational programmes quickly go out of date. Then, as Germany is a federal state, there are 16 different states (*Bundesländer*), which all have their own institutional structures, curricula and guidelines.

Moreover, *Gymnasium* being a typical German

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type of school, is not such an attractive area of research for international scholars. Finally, there is a gap between theory and practice, i.e. what official documents state on how English should be taught is not identical with how foreign languages are actually taught and learned in the classrooms.

So, what we have are a few political documents (e.g. KMK provisions), the curricula of the *Länder*, one large-scale empirical study (Schröder et al., 2006), the educational standards discourse (Zydati&szlig;, 2005, 2006; Baldus & Quarz, 2006), historical surveys (Liebau et al., 1997; Meißner, 1997), some teaching manuals (Doff & Klippel, 2007; Thaler, 2012), a limited number of usually short publications on very specific fields of teaching at *Gymnasium* (e.g. Finkbeiner, 1998; Fl&szlig;cher, 1998; Hennig, 1999; House, 2001; Siepmann, 2003), and personal experiences.

### **3. TERMINOLOGY**

The *Gymnasium* is a type of secondary school in Germany providing an in-depth general education aimed at the general higher education entrance qualification (*Allgemeine Hochschulreife*). In almost all federal states, there has been a change

from the nine-year to the eight-year Gymnasium, but this trend seems to be reversed at the moment, e.g. Bavaria will re-introduce the nine-year type in 2018.

The word *γυμνάσιον* (*gymnasion*) was used in Ancient Greece, meaning a place for both the physical and intellectual education of young men. It is derived from *gymn&os* meaning ‘naked’ because athletes competed in the nude, a practice meant to encourage aesthetic appreciation of the male body and a tribute to the gods. Here teachers gathered and instructed the young people, and thus the term came to mean an institution of learning.

In English, the meaning of a place for physical education was retained, more familiarly in the shortened form ‘gym’ (*Turnhalle*). The grammar schools in Britain are comparable to the German *Gymnasium*. Today, however, only a few grammar schools have survived because most of them were closed by the Labour Party or transformed into comprehensive schools (*Gesamtschulen*). Some of the more famous grammar schools, such as King Edward’s in Birmingham, did not want to give up the selective principle and became independent private schools.

In the United States, the *Gymnasium* is similar to the college and university preparatory schools, at least as far as curricula are concerned. They are

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quite expensive, though (\$10,000 to \$50,000 per year), they have a very low student-teacher ratio, and offer numerous sports activities. Their school-leavers (one out of 100 American students) usually move on to the best universities in the US.

#### 4. HISTORY

The German *Gymnasium* has a long tradition (Liebau et al., 1997). Of the double meaning of *Gymnasium* in ancient Greece, the one referring to a locality for intellectual education persisted in German. In Strassburg in 1538, John Sturm founded a school that became the model of the modern German *Gymnasium*. In 1812, a Prussian regulation decreed that all schools having the right to send their students to the university should bear the name of *Gymnasia*. Wilhelm von Humboldt, intending to secure a higher level of learning throughout the country, introduced this rule. In the first half of the 19th century, the traditional Latin school (*Lateinschule*) was gradually replaced by the *Humanistische Gymnasium*, which gave priority to the old languages Greek and Latin.

From the middle of the 19th century the humanistic *Gymnasium* was joined by the *Realgymnasium* (later *Neusprachliches Gymnasium*) focussing on the ‘newer languages’, which were French and English – and even later by the *Oberrealschule*, which emphasised natural science subjects (In the Weimar Republic Richert’s reforms added the *Oberschule*).

In all these types of schools, English and French were taught on the basis of the *grammar-translation method*, which had been employed to teach the classical languages throughout the centuries. It was obsessed with the written language to the exclusion of speech, and concentrated its attention on rote learning of grammatical rules and their application to isolated (and often incredibly silly) sentences.

In 1882, Wilhelm Viëtor’s pamphlet *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!* (*Language teaching must start afresh*) fiercely attacked this method and introduced the *direct method*. At the heart of his Reform Movement’s philosophy was the supremacy of the spoken language. The students should hear the new language first, spoken properly by the teacher in the classroom, before seeing it in its written form. The Reformers primarily aimed their appeal at the teachers in the *Realschule*, who were living in the shadow of ‘big brother’ *Gymnasium* – which, as expected, paid little heed.

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In the 20th century the audio-lingual method influenced teaching at German *Gymnasium* in the 60s and 70s (for example, leading schools to set up language labs), before the *communicative turn* established Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the major paradigm – at least in academic discourse, if not at the actual classroom level. This meant that at the level of teacher education and some teacher practice, interactive and communicative methods were at the forefront of teaching.

## 5. STRUCTURES

A characteristic feature of education in the Federal Republic of Germany is the so-called differentiated system (*gegliedertes Schulwesen*), which pupils enter after completing the primary school (*Grundschule*) together. Secondary education comprises *Gymnasium*, *Realschule*, *Mittelschule* – or *Gesamtschule* (comparable to British comprehensives or American high schools). *Gymnasium* prepares pupils to enter a university for advanced academic study and consists of the

lower secondary level (grades 5-9/10, *Sekundarstufe I*) and upper secondary level (10/11-12/13, *Sekundarstufe II*).

A further distinction is made between *Unterstufe* (grades 5-7), *Mittelstufe* (8-10) and *Oberstufe* (11-12). Apart from other (compulsory) subjects (German, maths, physics, chemistry, history, geography, etc.), students are required to study at least two foreign languages. The usual combinations are English and French, or English and Latin, although many schools make it possible to combine English with another language, most often Spanish, Ancient Greek, or Russian. The study of the first foreign language starts in the fifth grade, the second language (at G8) follows in grade 6.

According to the subject profiles, there are different branches called *Humanistisches Gymnasium* (humanities, classical languages), *Neusprachliches Gymnasium* (modern languages, students are required to study at least three foreign languages), *Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftliches Gymnasium* (mathematical-scientific education) plus a few others specialising in economic, social-scientific or musical education.

The order in which the languages are taught varies from state to state, e.g. in Bavaria you can study:

- Latin (from grade 5) – English (from grade 6) – French/Italian/Spanish/Russian (8), or

- English (5) – Latin (6) – French/Italian/ Spanish/Russian (8), or
- Latin/English (5) – English/Latin (6) – Greek (8)

There are also numerous *Gymnasien* which offer three modern foreign languages, e.g. English – French – Italian/ Spanish (or French – English – Italian/ Spanish).

All German states provide the *Abitur* examinations, which complete education after 12 (13) years. These final exams are centrally drafted and controlled in most states and qualify students to attend any university. Foreign languages play an important role, e.g. in Bavaria each *Gymnasium* student has to do an (oral or written) *Abitur* exam in L2 – which is mostly English. The vast majority of *Gymnasien* are public, i.e. state-funded, and do not charge tuition fees. In 2009/10, 2.5 million students attended a German *Gymnasium*, of which there are 3,000 all over Germany. The important thing to note is that the German *Gymnasium* stresses the importance of both foreign and classical languages as part of the *Abitur* exam, which is the ‘passport’ for entry to university.

## 6. CURRICULUM

A German *Gymnasium* is a selective school meant for the more academically minded students, who are sifted out at the age of 10–12. It provides an intensified general education. Apart from fostering

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subject-related competences, it aims at developing young people who show a high level of abstraction, self-organisation, problem-solving faculty, and heuristic curiosity.

In 2003 and 2004, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) adopted *Bildungsstandards* (educational standards) for the *Mittlerer Schulabschluss* (after grade 10) in various subjects, including the first foreign language (English/French). This has caused a change from input to output orientation, i.e. it is not the content of the courses but the learners’ achievements at the end of a period which determines success. The following competences are promoted throughout the eight years at *Gymnasium*, and are described in more detail in the curricula of the various *Länder*.

Communicative skills

- Listening-Viewing comprehension
- Reading comprehension
- Speaking

- Writing
- Mediating

#### Using linguistic means

- Pronunciation
- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Spelling

#### Method competences

- Text literacy
- Media literacy
- Study strategies

In the upper level of *Gymnasium*, students are provided with a rather high-level language training (aimed at Council of Europe Framework of Reference (CEFR) B2 and even C1 levels), more intensive linguistic reflection, Literature with a capital 'L', and diversified intercultural encounters. Here teaching is based on the national educational standards of 2012. The tasks in the exam include a *Textaufgabe* (reading text plus several questions/tasks), covering three requirement areas (comprehension, analysis and evaluation/creation), plus two language practice parts, e.g. mediation, listening comprehension, and speaking. This revision means that now all four (or five) basic skills can be tested in the *Abitur* – whereas in contrast, the long established previous system had tested only half of the basic skills (reading and writing). Moreover, the traditional version (L2-L1

translation) is being replaced by the more flexible form of mediation (transferring, *Sprachmittlung*).

## 7. METHODS

The curricula prescribed by the various *Länder* include guidelines on the treatment of the topics of instruction, distribution of materials and various didactic approaches. It is difficult, however, to assess how these suggestions are implemented in actual classroom practice. Basically, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) seems to be the approach generally accepted at German *Gymnasien*.

This was also proven by the DESI study, which brought about the following results for teaching at *Gymnasium*:

- Of all school types, *Gymnasium* places the greatest importance on communication.
- *Gymnasium* scores highest in accuracy.
- English is usually taught by using English, and the use of L1 is lowest at *Gymnasium*.
- Student talking time (STT) is highest at *Gymnasium*.
- There are more and longer teacher-student dialogues.
- The highest quality level is found at *Gymnasium*.

DESI also tried to find out which methods and procedures were used in classrooms. The following statistics was reported for *Gymnasium*:

- Small group work: 61%
- Discussions: 46%
- Independent work: 14%
- Station learning: 9%
- Project work: 7%
- Peer-tutoring: 7%
- Weekly plan: 5%

According to a study investigating teaching methods at 37 schools (Thaler, 2008), teachers at *Gymnasium* (and other school types) overwhelmingly favour *balanced teaching*, i.e. a combination of closed, teacher-fronted instruction and open, student-centred techniques. They regard such a balance as a fine way to minimise the weaknesses of both approaches while maximising their respective strengths, which is why it is being applied widely.

In an endeavour to intensify foreign language education at lower and upper secondary level schools, bilingual programmes have grown increasingly important. The first were introduced at *Gymnasien* in 1969, and today these bilingual sections are run chiefly at this school type (and increasingly at *Realschule*). Bilingual education involves teaching academic content in two languages, in a native and secondary language (English or French), with varying amounts of each language used in accordance with the programme model. These additional opportunities to use the target language have positive effects on

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the students’ language achievement, in particular their communicative competence. In listening comprehension at the end of grade nine, for example, they are two school years (!) ahead of students following a non-bilingual method.

## 8. MEDIA

According to a survey (Meißner, 1997), *Gymnasium* teachers make use of the following media and materials (at least a few times per month):

- Coursesbooks and worksheets: 96%
- Non-fictional texts: 70%
- Photos: 68%
- CDs: 66%
- Pictures: 59%
- Mindmaps: 48%
- Notes: 44%
- Novels: 5%
- Dramas: 4%

*‘Although there are no reliable empirical studies on the relative distribution of these types, it is generally known that type C is hard to find’*

- Nonsense texts: 3%
- Novellas: 3%
- Fables: 2%

It is no surprise that the coursebook turns out to be the most important medium in *Gymnasium* classrooms (Thaler, 2011). As a mediator between official curriculum and individual lessons, the textbook (*Lehrbuch*) and the coursebook (*Lehrwerk*) play a dominant role in the lower level (*Sek I*) of all secondary schools (also see Finkbeiner, 1998, p. 43).

It is true that the criticism of coursebook use has a very long tradition, but teachers also appreciate its numerous benefits: It provides a systematic syllabus, functions as a guideline for the teacher’s and student’s work, offers a lot of enriching components, is compact, looks professional – and saves time. As far as the actual usage of coursebooks is concerned, one usually distinguishes between three types of teachers (eg. Kurtz, 2010, p. 151):

- Type A sticks to the progression of the textbook completely and works through all

the sections.

- Type B basically accepts the textbook, but supplements it with materials copied from other books or produced DIY-wise.
- Type C designs his or her own materials or compiles them from various coursebooks.

Although there are no reliable empirical studies on the relative distribution of these types, it is generally known that type C is hard to find. Even if textbooks should only be *‘proposals for action, not instructions for use’* (Harmer, 2001 p. 8) they guide teaching at *Gymnasium* to a high extent.

The coursebook market at the lower level of *Gymnasium* (Sekundarstufe I) is dominated by the two big publishing companies Cornelsen (Access) and Klett (Green Line) – with Diesterweg taking the third place (Camden Town). In the upper level (*Sek II*) the big three, i.e. Cornelsen (New Context), Klett (Green Line Oberstufe) and Schöningh (Summit), share the market. Regarding the development of coursebooks over the last decades, one can identify the following trends (Thaler, 2011).

**Expansion.** The number of components has grown enormously, which can be regarded as an increase of choice, but also as material overload (Doff & Klippel, 2007, p. 143).

**Differentiation.** Not only has the textbook itself

integrated elements of differentiation (modules, obligatory and optional sections, grading of difficulty etc.), but certain extra materials promote self-evaluation (portfolios), cater for slower learners (*Fördermaterial*), take different learner types into consideration (*Freiarbeitsmaterialien*), take account of varying pre-knowledge (students with or without primary school English), or allow for individual class text preparation (*Klassenarbeitstrainer*).

Quality. Many materials can make the English language teacher's work simpler, better and more rewarding, e.g. imaginative teachers' manuals, a teacher's version of the textbook with colour-marked new lexis and structures, or a copyright-free DVD with task-accompanied scenes from feature films.

Innovation. Recent developments like the Common European Framework, national educational standards, output and competence orientation, IT innovations, the constructivism debate, task-based approaches, open and creative techniques, intercultural learning etc. are (partly) reflected in the new coursebooks.

Oligopoly. The coursebook market is dominated by a few big publishing houses.

Mainstream. The coursebook by the various publishers have become more and more similar

over the decades. All of them try to implement a learner-centred communicative approach, which aims at the competences suggested by the KMK and offers several levels of progression, yet still emphasises lexical and structural progression.

Regionalisation. Over the last decade, the federal structure of Germany has led to a regional differentiation of coursebooks.

Multimedia. Today's coursebooks come with film DVDs, practice software, and links to the publisher's website. The tool of the future may be a digital teacher's platform (online or offline) which enables central access to all components of the coursebook (Thaler, 2011). Students as well may profit from their own electronic platform – a lot of German *Gymnasien* are already making use of MOODLE.

The use of new media is growing increasingly important, access to electronic networks is now granted at all schools, and the future will show whether the interactive whiteboard becomes as popular as it is in British schools.

## 9. EVALUATION

The evaluation of *Gymnasium* students' progress takes place at three levels. At the classroom level, the assessment of a given pupil's performance is based on all the written and oral work he or she has done in connection with the class in question,

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with class tests being spread evenly over the school year. The requirements in this work are gauged to meet the standards laid down in the curricula, and performance is assessed according to a six-mark system (1 = very good ... 6 = very poor).

At the second level, the introduction of national educational standards and the establishment of the Institute for Educational Progress (Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen: IQB), marking the beginning of a paradigm shift towards an output-oriented control of educational assessment, has given rise to various measures for developing the quality of school education. Among others, in order to ensure the comparability of the pupils’ performances, comparative tests take place in the *Länder* at regular intervals. The results of these *Vergleichsarbeiten* have revealed that there are striking differences between different *Länder*,

within one state, between city and countryside, within one city, and even within the same *Gymnasium*.

At the third level, the results of international comparative studies of students’ achievements are considered. If one differentiates PISA results according to school type, the German *Gymnasium* turns out to be the most successful school type in the world (PISA I tested mathematics, reading, and natural sciences, not foreign languages, though).

The DESI study (*Deutsch-Englisch-Schülerleistungen International*), which tested students’ performances in German and English in grade 9, has proven that *Gymnasien* both have the highest quality level and the lowest spectrum, i.e. a vast majority show a high competence level in English. The percentage of students who are beyond level C (with levels ranging from A to D) is ca. 10% (DESI 2006).

## 10. TEACHER EDUCATION

The education of teachers at *Gymnasium* (and other types of schools) is governed by *Länder* legislation. The relevant statutory provisions include laws and regulations for teacher training, *Studienordnungen* (study regulations) for teacher training courses, *Prüfungsordnungen* (examination regulations) for the *Erste Staatsprüfung* (First State Examination), *Ausbildungsordnungen* (training regulations) for the *Vorbereitungsdienst*

(preparatory service) and examination regulations for the *Zweite Staatsprüfung* (Second State Examination). *Gymnasium* teacher education is divided into two stages. The first period is a course of higher education at university and includes:

- a specialist component (including English didactics) with the study of at least two subjects (English plus French/German/History, etc.); in English, students cover the five areas of language practice, literary studies, linguistics, cultural studies and TEFL (didactics).
- an educational science component with compulsory study of educational theory and psychology plus a choice of additional study areas (the so-called *Bildungswissenschaften*).
- teaching practice, sometimes of several weeks' duration, accompanying courses of study.

The second stage comprises practical pedagogic training in the form of a *Vorbereitungsdienst* (preparatory service), which takes place in teacher training institutes (*Studienseminare*) and training schools. It is intended to provide future teachers with the ability to plan and structure English lessons, deal with complex teaching situations, promote sustainable learning, and manage performance assessment.

The basic entry requirement for teacher education

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is passing the Abitur examination. Some universities additionally have a placement test, which at some places has a special entry condition, i.e. you can only start your teacher education if you have passed the test or achieved a certain grade made up of the test and the Abitur achievement. After finishing the Second State Examination, you also need a certain grade to qualify to become a state system teacher. This depends on the present demand and supply situation, and varies greatly from year to year.

The present reform of teacher training includes the implementation of a consecutive structure of study courses with Bachelor's and Master's degrees (BA/MA). The *Länder* have also initiated reform measures relating to the increase of professionalism in teaching, which is to be seen in

conjunction with quality development in the school sector. The competences which are aimed at, according to these regulations, are subdivided into four areas: teaching, education, assessment, and innovation.

In spite of all these reform attempts, there are still things left to be desired:

- a stronger focus on TEFL
- a more extensive practical orientation during teacher training
- intensification of the relations between the theoretical and practical stages (phases I and II)
- particular significance of the induction period for newly qualified teachers

## 11. CONCLUSION

The German *Gymnasium* can look back upon a long tradition and has proved to be a successful school form. The *Bundesdirektorenkonferenz der Gymnasien*, which may not adopt an utterly unbiased stance, even hails it as the most successful German school type, which has been a model for the educational development in lots of other countries. This organisation, which represents more than 2200 *Gymnasien* in Germany, is trying to reform the secondary school sector (Otto, 2011), as the existence of more than 70 different secondary schools makes the system anything but transparent. It is pleading for a second pillar (called *Oberschule*) alongside the

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*Gymnasium*, and a two-tier system seems to have broad support in most *Länder*.

With more and more children opting for the *Gymnasium*, this school type, however, will also become more heterogeneous in the future.

In this paper, we have examined the factors that have raised the level of the *Gymnasium* type school to the level of a language learning leader in the secondary sector.

We have assessed the influence of education structure, curriculum, methodology, assessment and teacher education on raising language learning standards and identified the key factors of curriculum, methodology, teacher education and the use of media and Interactive Communications Technologies (ICT) in contributed to its success. The German education system recognises the importance of languages and media literacy as fundamentals of a well-rounded education.

We have also noted that although both classical modern foreign languages are represented in secondary education up to Abitur, English

language teaching remains the first priority. We also recognise that although much has been done, much still remains to be done and we have identified the factors where German language education in the Gymnasium system needs to improve.

Above all, we recognise that as world language

No 1, English will continue to play a vital role in future *Gymnasien*. Yet, present trends such as growing globalisation (EIL – English as an International Language), increasing lingua-franca contacts (question of norm) and multilingualism and pluriculturalism (English as a gateway to languages) will transform the status of English and other languages at German *Gymnasien* as well.

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