

## Making a Success of German against All Odds

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**Abstract:** This paper is an account of how the German Department at Oundle School (Peterborough), has taken risks and changed its approach towards methodology and recruitment in order to boost the numbers opting for German in the final two years of school.

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**Keywords:** German, decline, success, rigorous, expertise, recruitment, results

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### Background

When I was at school, and then at Edinburgh University in the early 90s, and even when I started teaching just over 20 years ago, language departments were booming. This is sadly no longer the case, particularly in England where I live and work now. We currently have no national policy on languages, unlike Scotland. All 16-year olds take 'GCSE' examinations in a number of subjects, usually between seven and ten, and then choose three or four of these to continue during their senior years (the so-called A-levels), many with the intention to progress into university.

Numbers in languages are continuing to fall at GCSE as well as at A-level and many schools are phasing out those languages that are either least popular or have the least expertise amongst the teaching staff. Unfortunately German has been one of the most starkly hit languages and could be referred to as one of the lesser-taught languages these days, both in schools and at university level. This can be seen when examining the A level entries:

Entries for A level French have declined by a third since 2002, and those for German by nearly half. This continues a trend seen since the 1990s... (Tinsley & Board, 2016)

In 2002 there were 6,367 candidates entered for A-level German. Last summer (2016) there were only 3,624 (Department of Education, 2016). So it is easy to see why the German department might be the first one to go when cutbacks need to be made. Several of my counterparts in both state and independent sectors have reported to me in the last three years that their senior management had told them that they are unable to offer German any longer. It is a similar situation at tertiary level. The number of universities offering German degrees has halved over a period of 15 years (Codrea-Rado, 2013) and Queen's University Belfast closed its German department more recently in 2014. It has also been widely reported in the press (Paton, 2010; Tuck, 2010) that languages and especially those with lower uptake, such as German, are becoming an elitist subject, taught mainly in independent schools. Luckily, 90% independent

schools decided to keep a modern language as one of the core subjects for GCSE back in 2004 when they were made non-compulsory in England so many still have language departments today (Paton, 2011). Nevertheless, the change to non-compulsory status affected language provision in all schools, as it gave out a negative message about the status and value of learning a language. German in particular has suffered from negative press for many years amidst claims that it is more difficult. I strongly dispute this, based on the evidence provided by results in German at my school from very mixed ability sets, and the 2001 Survey of Modern Languages for French and German (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2003), commissioned by the Assessment of Achievement Programme, which compared boys' and girls' progress in both languages, found that attainments in German were higher than those in French, significantly so in respect of listening and reading. When examined through an assessment involving articles, it was found that students of German were significantly more likely than students of French to be aware of the reasons for changing the form of the definite article and the same study compared performance in listening and speaking in French and German in the early stages of learning those languages and concluded that it was possible that German is an easier language at the beginner stages than French, contrary to what many people believe. German has also suffered because of historical and cultural differences between Germany and Great Britain and because of its reputation, as Marko Pajevic (2014) explains when he talks about stereotyping the German language. He refers to the 'barbaric German language' and how it is portrayed in American films. This, in my view, is indicative of ignorance as well as stereotyping.

Other problems with language learning in England have been the level of achievement expected at GCSE and A-level, as well as the content of the curriculum. In my view language teachers are often too modest in their expectations of how much young people should be able to achieve. Furthermore, courses have become less culture-based with less grammatical emphasis and more topic-based with a communicative emphasis. The more interesting cultural content has been replaced by a requirement to be able to talk and write purely about yourself (your school, your family, your hobbies, holidays and so on) or at a higher level discussions and essays are dominated by social problems. The challenge and joy that came with manipulating and playing with language and creating your own interesting oral or written texts has disappeared. It has, in recent years, been about learning by heart and as a result the quality of linguists moving into the Sixth Form has diminished.

## **My Personal Experience**

When I arrived at Oundle School as Head of Modern Languages back in 2008, I left behind fourteen Germanists moving into Lower Sixth and an Upper Sixth of ten students at my previous school, where German was compulsory to GCSE, and found myself with only five Lower Sixth and four Upper Sixth students. The following year only three carried on to the Lower Sixth.

We had a problem: an image problem. I knew that this was not going to go away quickly. Changing the perceptions of young people is not easy. German came out at fifth place overall in the British Council 'Languages for the Future' report (British Council, 2014). What I have learned is that most students will not buy into arguments about the utility of learning German. So they disregard compelling evidence, for example:

- Increased career opportunities (especially in engineering, business, EU, Music): Germany came out as the second most highly rated language for 'usefulness' to companies (ibid: 44)
- Germany is the biggest exporting nation within Europe: German is the top language associated with the UK's current largest export markets (ibid: 11).
- German has the largest number of native speakers of any language within Europe (European Commission, 2012).
- By implication, those few proficient in German would be in high demand, a claim that is backed up by findings from the 2013 Education and Skills survey (CBI, 2014) by the Confederation of British Industry: It cited German as the second most sought after language by employers.
- More recently the humanitarian role-model argument, as we have seen in several media reports about Germany's commitment to helping Syrian refugees.

In my experience, young people are more concerned about the here and now, not what the future brings, and the world of work can seem very far off. Therefore, they need to feel that they are making great progress, overcoming tricky patches to a state of accomplishment, and that they are enjoying the experience of learning a language. These are the key points to bear in mind.

Within five years, I had managed to quadruple the numbers of Germanists in the Sixth Form. There was a slight slump last academic year, but numbers are up again with nine in the Lower Sixth from this September, where many similar schools are struggling to attract two or three pupils. I believe that our success is down to enjoyment, challenge and the joy that comes from high achievement.

## **Key Changes in Approach**

In order to increase the number of pupils opting for German as a Sixth Form choice, many changes in our approach were made. I will outline these below.

### **1. More rigorous testing**

One decision had actually been taken a few months before I arrived, by the previous Head of German: Replace the A-level with the Pre-U qualification. It was developed by Cambridge International Examinations as an alternative preparation for university entry. In the words of the Exam board it "prepares learners with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed at university. It promotes independent and self-directed learning in

preparation for undergraduate study” (in Scotland the *Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages* serves a similar purpose).

In my view this was the single most effective step to making German more popular. Since the new specifications were to be taught from 2008 Heads of Department of all subjects, including individual languages were given the option to stick with A-level or switch to the new Pre-U qualifications in their subject which had just been developed. The then Head of German felt that the Pre-U offered more in terms of rigour with its increased cultural element and grammar testing. Although this was the first year of teaching this new qualification, so we were heading into unknown territory initially, we found the course to be exciting, liberating and much more interesting content-wise. The qualification is more rigorous, but not more difficult than A-level, and also more flexible. Students are encouraged to pursue their own interests within the German-speaking world, either via independent reading or research. The independent research topic for the oral exam, although initially daunting, has been the most popular and enjoyable part of the exam because the students take ownership and have a free choice. It has made their German course more relevant to them. Not one candidate has ever scored lower than a D3 (= A grade) in the oral. This element of the examination is to be replicated in all new A-level language courses which are being taught from September 2016. On top of this, the marking and grading has been extremely consistent and accurate, which we had not found to be the case at A-level. Results have been very good and consistently so, allowing students and teachers alike to have faith in being rewarded for their efforts. To ensure this is the case, it is vital to get to know the qualification and assessment methods inside out. We did this by regularly communicating with the board, with other schools following the same qualification and by examining returned scripts as a department. A department that achieves consistently good results is important to students who want to get strong grades for university. Raising the bar and incorporating more challenging material has increased German’s popularity at our school.

## **2. Making the content more exciting and more relevant**

In order to entice students to take up German in the Sixth Form, the standard and content of the middle years of teaching must be gripping. To do this we decided to not stick rigidly to the examination specification, but to sometimes make diversions and use a film to teach a vocabulary topic or grammatical structure, or set project work with presentations, use the latest music or literature from Germany, even with our youngest pupils. We have also experimented with Pupil Voice and devised a scheme of work for one term, based on their requests and what they perceived as their needs, provided that the suggestion is backed up with a reason why it would benefit their learning of German. We use the most authentic resource of all, our German Assistant, with all of our classes. She not only takes pupils out of the class in small groups for conversational work and games, and presents on cultural aspects of her home-life, but we also team-teach with the Sixth Form, even acting out roles, to encourage debate. There are so many fantastic resources out there now via the Goethe Institut, Deutsche Welle or even

on websites like [deutschdrang.com](http://deutschdrang.com) and [deutschalsfremdsprache.ch](http://deutschalsfremdsprache.ch). The new BBC GCSE Bitesize German went live in autumn 2016 and contains excellent materials – topics, grammar, and culture. Again, progress is important, and we teach all of the case rules before the Sixth Form and four or five tenses, depending on the ability of the set. Without the basic tools, how can they be expected to be successful?

### 3. Recruiting staff with expertise and energy

Recruitment of staff is also crucial. There is far too much negativity around language learning at the moment so finding teachers who will not become deflated easily, but who will remain positive and strong becomes really important. Having teachers with different approaches, some with a more traditional and some a more communicative approach works best in my experience, so that students are exposed to both methods. However, teachers should be willing to experiment, learn from one another and try each other's approaches out. A 'goldener Mittelweg' (happy medium) from these two methods is definitely what we should be aspiring to. Pupils need to have confidence in their teachers. Teachers with true expertise and a high linguistic level have become more difficult to find and I believe this is a knock-on effect of the decision to make GCSE languages non-compulsory and then fewer opting for languages at A-level and university. If they do not feel that they are in 'good hands' pupils are likely to panic or to play up. Rapport and reassurance are both so important, but so are support and challenge. Pupils want teachers who will give up their time to help them when they need it, to help them get those grades, but there is also great satisfaction from being challenged and then getting there. They do not want just fun and games; they want to feel they are really achieving something as well. Our students know that they can arrange to see us any time they need help – before school, at break, after school. They can e-mail us with questions. Their success matters to us. This ties in with what my pupils told me when I asked them what they thought made a good language teacher and a positive language learning experience:

*I like teachers that can challenge me but also support me when I need help. I like to have fun but getting down to work is important as well.*

*A language teacher should not only teach you the language itself but also the culture behind the languages and teach from experience*

*Whilst culture is important, I think a thorough grounding in grammar is key. Once you know how the grammar works and the vocab slots in you begin to understand sentences. That is the best sense of achievement.*

*Not be intimidating as it doesn't make the pupil feel very confident in the language. And to be helped when making mistakes, not just ignoring the pupil's mistake.*

*A language teacher should be enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the culture of the countries in which the language is spoken.*

*They should be entertaining*

Not a tall order, then!

#### 4. Extending learning beyond the classroom

So how, do we make our German lessons more enjoyable? We take a serious approach to being *auf dem Laufenden* (up-to-date) on all relevant matters, including current affairs. It helps having a German Assistant and one native speaker teacher in the department and we celebrate all of the events happening in Germany. We use authentic materials, including original texts, and guide them through these, much more than the text books.

Our teachers are active in their networking with colleagues from other schools and on Facebook pages such as Secondary MFL Matters, Teaching German, Oxford German Network, German Embassy London and the Independent Schools' Modern Language Association. They also keep in regular contact with other institutions that support German teaching, even if just by e-mail or by asking for support with teaching resources when teaching something new or entering their competitions. Do not under-estimate the impact of winning or even just taking part in a national competition. Colleagues from these institutions are likely to be more than happy to come in to school for a morning or afternoon to give a talk, a series of talks or workshops too, as we are all supporting the same cause. Here are some examples:

- Goethe Institut
- Austrian Cultural Forum
- UK-German Connection
- British Council
- Oxford German Network (and other German Network Hubs)
- UK Linguistics Olympiad (not specifically German, but tends to attract Germanists!)
- German departments from universities around the country

Through a colleague who studied at Warwick University, our contacts to the institution have developed to such an extent that we have regular visits from their German lecturers. We have also set up a highly successful project whereby final year students from Warwick deliver speaking practice sessions to our students via Skype. Indeed, Skype has proven an excellent and easy way to get interesting speakers into contact with our pupils. Highlights have been a Q&A session with a German-Turk in Berlin and a set text discussion with a German professor from North Carolina University. On top of talks we hold our annual '*Oktoberfest*' for Sixth Form and '*Tanz in den Mai*' event for the younger year groups. We also have an active German Society where older students lead sessions for younger pupils; and we have brought former pupils back in to speak about how German has changed their lives or helped their careers.

Our German teachers are also avid trip leaders. Our introductory trip for Year 9 to the Christmas Markets and to Hamelin where they meet the Pied Piper has become extremely popular and our exchange with a school in Hamburg is going strong after 25 years. Finally, we organise a Sixth Form Study Trip to Berlin and the former East, where

meetings are set up with politicians, Greenpeace and a Berlin Criminologist amongst others. The trip, which includes a weekend at a boarding school near Leipzig, is enlightening – as well as exhausting!

### **5. Support from your School Leaders**

It is however, important that your Senior Leadership Team is supportive and I have been extremely lucky in this respect. Senior Managers need to understand the importance of language learning, in particular of languages like German. Without the support and flexibility of the timetabler our task would be impossible. If the timetable is created in such a way that it pushes German out, makes it impossible for it to be taught in certain year groups or only at strange times then this will be to its detriment. We were lucky that around 25 years ago German was given a bolster by being put into the year 8 (12-year-olds) timetable as an option, alongside Ancient Greek. Some timetable time was taken from French, but this was agreed for one sole purpose: to help German. If young people do not have the chance to try German, they will never know whether or not they might enjoy or even excel.

### **Conclusion/Looking to the Future**

The German Department at our school has a reputation for excellent results, for covering interesting topics in class and for being supportive, enthusiastic and energetic. We now have more students going on to university to study German or study in Germany, many of whom go on to live and work in Germany. Word of mouth is your strongest weapon. If those in the Sixth Form doing German are enjoying it and are flourishing, word will spread around the student body.

Of course, I am not trying to say that this has been easy and I am not denying that in the UK, we simply do not feel the necessity to learn a language such as German as strongly as top language-learning countries like Sweden, Finland, Belgium and the Netherlands do. We are also at a disadvantage to other European countries where they are surrounded by English through music, films, the media, social media and even advertising in their daily lives. We speak the world language here, but this in turn should not make us complacent and lazy. From an economic standpoint, we are leaving ourselves in a vulnerable position if we are going to rely upon the language skills of other countries, not to mention the fact that our young people will be pipped to the post by their European counterparts for the top jobs in international companies. Young Germans leave school with at least one additional language at a high level, if not two or three. Telling our students this does make them think. Learning a language gives you access to other cultures that you simply cannot claim if you are monolingual. The insight into other worlds can have life-changing effects. We owe it to our young people to do all we can to keep German, and indeed all languages taught in schools, as alive and well as possible.

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