

## Action-oriented language teaching – „Ja genau!“

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### Introduction

With a long-established tradition of German language programming across Canada (Plews, 2007) based around a relatively narrow range of North American German language course materials (Snider, 2005), I was pleasantly surprised to come across a different kind of German textbook recently: *Ja genau! Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (Böschel, Giersberg, & Hägi, 2009). To date, the handful of established German language textbooks widely used in North America have not kept in step with current developments in second language acquisition research (e.g., Atkinson, 2011) or today's growing diversity in Canadian modern language classrooms (Duff, 2007) which calls for flexible, locally-oriented pedagogies and language teaching resources. In the last century, changes from "traditional to modern paradigms" (Trim 2012) of language teaching and learning have involved a shift from form-focused instruction to developing communicative ability, from decontextualized language to discourse and the use of authentic texts, and from teacher-centred to learner-oriented teaching. Former emphasis on grammar-/literary-based curricula has made room for participatory learning and a social practice view of language (Johnson, 2009). And yet, the German language textbooks presently informing teaching practices among modern language instructors in North America fail to fully align with substantial developments in second language (L2) education over the past fifty years (Olsen, 2000).

While course materials represent only one component of syllabus design and classroom practice, the language textbook nevertheless constitutes a primary force in shaping what gets taught and how (Crookes, 1997; Snider, 2005). This is especially the case when teachers' engagement with pedagogy and methodology is neglected due to overriding concerns about their own language competency (Wernicke-Heinrichs, 2013), in part reinforced by the "native speaker" standard that still operates as the decisive hiring criterion (Valdès, 2005; Train, 2007) with little consideration of candidates' knowledge and effective use of L2 teaching methods. In addition, there has been a general lack of training and professional development support for language teachers (Crookes, 1997) and lower level language courses continue to be taught by graduate teaching assistants or non-permanent instructors with little control over curricular design and often with less experience (Schmenk, 2010). For these reasons, the course textbook understandably becomes the central resource for both students and teachers in guiding the learning process.

The following discussion presents an account of my experiences using the *Ja genau!* textbook as well as some reflections as to how and why an action-based syl-

labus privileging situated language use offers a welcome alternative to approaches provided by current North American textbooks. The discussion begins with a brief look at what first peaked my interest in the *Ja genau!* series, from both a practical and pedagogical perspective, followed by a short descriptive overview of the book series. Next I describe my experience using the *Ja genau!* series in a first-year university German course at a Canadian university with a focus on how its approach provided a response to some of the challenges I had encountered with other textbooks – specifically the need to move beyond normative and rule-oriented target language input and an insistence on “correct” language (cf. Olsen, 2000). In the main section of the discussion I examine the theoretical elements underlying the *Ja genau!* textbook in the hopes of offering some insights into why it was so successfully taken up by both the students and me as teacher. This discussion focuses on the European action-oriented perspective associated with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) as well as conceptions of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in both Europe and North America, both in relation to the *Ja genau!* series, with particular attention to the layout, situated nature of content, and thematic organization of the textbook.

## First impressions

During my many years of teaching German at the post-secondary level, I have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with three of the most commonly used introductory German language textbooks: *Treffpunkt Deutsch* (Widmaier, Widmaier, & Gonglewski, 2012), the Krashen-inspired “natural method” in *Kontakte* (Terrell, Tschirner, & Nikolai, 2004), and the story-based approach of *Vorsprung* (Lovik, Guy, & Chavez, 2007). As discussed by others (e.g., Hook & Kahn, 1990), these North American tomes tend to cover an extensive, in some cases almost unmanageable amount of content for a first-year curriculum. In addition to an abundance of vocabulary, lexical items frequently include low-frequency words and short-lived or outdated colloquialisms which have little or no relevance to the topics or situations covered in class. Furthermore, the use of English in grammar explanations and activity instructions (Olsen, 2000) clearly privileges the monolingual anglophone student. Hence, my initial reaction to having a substantially thinner textbook come across my desk was one of optimistic curiosity. However, opting not to judge this book by its glossy, two-toned cover, I decided to investigate how it compared with its North American counterparts and whether it might perhaps be integrated into the existing language curriculum at my institution.

After spending some time going through the book, mapping out a few activities, and researching the series online, several aspects caught my attention. First, given that the book was written solely in German, it promised a potentially more equitable starting point for our linguistically diverse classes. Second, there was a visible absence of lengthy grammar explanations expounding on the structural complexity of the German language. Third, the language learning activities appeared to foreground an action-based approach explicitly geared to the CEFR, which meant that it corresponded with current interest in Canada to align with this framework (CAUTG Mailinglist, 2012; CMEC, 2010; Vandergrift, 2006). Thus, given my frustrations with per-

sisting “old-school” conceptions of language learning reinforced by the textbooks my colleagues and I were using, I decided to take the leap and abandon the syllabus I had spent years developing in order to give this European approach a try.

## **Ja genau!**

### **3.1 Overview**

The *Ja genau!* textbooks are geared to adult learners of 16 years and older and are organized into a six-volume series covering CEFR levels A1, A2, and B1, with two volumes comprising each competency level. The first two volumes in the series, A1: Band 1 & 2, are the primary focus of this discussion. Each of the six textbooks in the series includes an integrated workbook section. The first half of each book contains the content units while the second half contains the corresponding workbook units. Appendices at the back of each volume include a review of grammar and pronunciation, transcriptions for the accompanying audio texts, and a corresponding vocabulary list which cross-references each word to the unit and exercise in which it was first introduced. Supplementary workbooks (*Sprachtraining*) offer a more in-depth study of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pragmatic and sociolinguistic conventions, and are available for both the DaF (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*) and DaZ (*Deutsch als Zweitsprache*) learning contexts. The series as a whole prepares novice users of German for the German language examinations *Zertifikat Deutsch* and the more recent *Deutsch-Test für Zuwanderer* (DTZ). It also explicitly aligns with the objectives of the *Framework Curriculum for Integration Courses* of German as a second language (Goethe-Institut, 2013). Although conceived with both German as a second and a foreign language in mind, its emphasis is on learners’ integration into a German-speaking environment by developing the necessary linguistic, intercultural, and strategic skills and knowledge to be able to function independently in society.

### **3.2 My experience with *Ja genau!***

In 2012, I decided to adopt *Ja genau!* for a first-year German language program taught over two consecutive semesters at a university in the Pacific southwest region of Canada. The following account of my experiences implementing this approach is primarily anecdotal and I recognize that it is unlikely that the successes my students and I encountered were strictly a result of using the textbook. At the same time, my decision to adopt the *Ja genau!* series entailed a full-scale redesign of the entire program which, to a large extent, was prompted by the pedagogical approach associated with the book’s action-based orientation. In the end, the positive outcomes I experienced that year were in such contrast to my previous years of teaching German that I hesitate to attribute this difference merely to that particular group of students or to my implementation of alternative strategies. These positive experiences included an elevated awareness among the students about their learning process and evident differences in code choice by the students.

In addition to a consistently high level of attendance and an unexpectedly low rate of attrition among this group of students from one term to the next, a notable outcome of using *Ja genau!* was that it seemed to encourage a higher level of learning awareness. Students began comparing the German course with other language courses they had taken by remarking on a number of differences: the substantial reduction in explicit grammar explanations; the need to reconsider their approach to language learning; and the emerging use of German among students in the classroom. Besides learning awareness, students also demonstrated greater learner autonomy, for example, expressing an interest in more extensive reading of German outside of class or reflecting on the efficacy of the weekly assigned “*Radio D*” podcast episodes (Meese, 2005). This noticeable increase in responsiveness among the students may well have been encouraged by my explicit discussion of the CEFR as a guiding framework for the textbook. Moreover, introducing a simplified “*Sprachenpass*” or language passport (Bühler-Otten, 2007) and giving students an opportunity to voice concerns and questions in a journal in conjunction with their weekly writing task likely also contributed to heightened reflexivity.

### 3.3 Code choice

Another encouraging development was students’ persistent efforts to use German, even outside the classroom. As noted earlier, an important aspect distinguishing *Ja genau!* from North American textbooks is that the series is written entirely in German. An important consequence of this is that it creates, from the outset, a level playing field for all students in the class. Regardless of the languages they may already speak, the starting point is the same for each student when it comes to being guided and supported throughout the language learning process. A significant feature of the CEFR action-based approach is that language users’ pre-existing language competences and communicative strategies constitute a crucial resource in their L2 development. Although strict adherence to the target language in the L2 classroom has commonly been associated with a monoglossic (Martin-Jones, 2007) “native-speaker” ideology in SLA (e.g., Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1996; Rampton, 1990), the *Ja genau!* textbooks provide students with a default identity as plurilingual language users, thereby avoiding the usual deficiency-oriented classification as mere “L2 learner.” This is evident in the textbooks’ use of all three (German, Austrian, and Swiss) standard regional varieties in vocabulary displays and the inclusion of L2 speakers of German among the textbooks’ main characters, alongside and in interaction with speakers for whom German is the first and dominant language. Accompanying audio recordings thus feature a diverse selection of German speakers, all of whom are presented as regular users of German, whether as a first or additional language.

In view of this, I decided to build on the textbooks’ plurilingual perspective to encourage the use of German in the classroom as the language of choice (cf. Levine, 2011), alongside other languages spoken by the students (see Figure 1. below).



Figure 1. Presentation slide used on the first day of the course to explain code preference.

In addition to the *Sprachenpass*, which allowed students to formally acknowledge their other languages, I decided to verbally interact with the students in German only. Supplementary written explanations were provided in English on presentation slides or via email correspondence. Admittedly, enforcing German-only interaction on my part was challenging at first, especially when faced with the unnerving blank stare of a student unable to grasp my response to their question. Therefore, familiarizing students with classroom discourse and encouraging them to draw on English cognates and other metalinguistic resources constituted important introductory activities. Throughout the term students resorted to English and other languages during group work but also made a visible effort to use German when interacting with me in class, during office hours, and when corresponding by email. These emails, composed either in part or entirely in German, usually expressed thanks, a request for clarification about homework, or an excuse for being absent from class. Figure 2. below offers a prime example of this and clearly points to the heightened level of learner autonomy the students began to demonstrate as the term progressed. This email was one of several written in German by this student, with an English translation of the German version added at the end to ensure successful reception of the message:

Mon 12/11/2012 9:11 PM

Liebe Meike,

Ich kann morgen nicht zu Deutschkurs gehen. Ich bin sehr müde von meine Operation letzte Freitag. Alles is gut aber ich bin sehr müde. Bitte entschuldigen. Bis Freitag.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen  
[name of student]

In case I did not make sense, I will not be able to come to class tomorrow as I am still really tired and sore from my operation on Friday. ...

Figure 2. Email sent by a student two months into the first semester.

Of particular interest is that this email builds on a textbook task we had previously done in class, which helps to explain the appropriate use of salutations and expressions, not always a given at this stage. The minor grammatical and orthographic omissions point to the careful crafting of the text, possibly with consultation of the textbook and a dictionary – note that opting for a wholesale cut-and-paste English to German translation would have ensured the appropriate use of umlauts for *müde* and *Grüßen*. On a pragmatic level, the thematic structuring – i.e. placing the statement about being tired at the beginning of the message and prior to mention of the operation – appropriately prioritizes the student's fatigue as the focus of the message while at the same time indexing my prior knowledge of the student having to undergo a medical procedure that week.

While this independent use of German was something that I had not experienced with “beginning” students before, certainly not after only two months into the program, it is likely that my own enthusiasm for the textbook's approach was a contributing factor. This enthusiasm was a direct result of the textbook facilitating instructional practices that I had been attempting to implement for some time in order to arrive at the outcomes I was suddenly seeing – such as the independent use of German by students. Probably the most interesting aspect of the email in Figure 2. is that it shows the student orienting not only to an identity as learner but also as legitimate user of German. In the next section I examine what, in addition to code choice and learner awareness, may have led to this orientation within the context of an action-oriented/task-based approach.

## From communicative to action-oriented teaching

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, CLT has evolved through several phases, mostly as a reaction to traditional grammar-focused language study as well as behaviorist-inspired methods of language teaching. Founded on the notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1974), CLT includes the development of not only grammatical but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic knowledge (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1978). This necessarily involves consideration of other

aspects of language use, such as the setting and purpose of target language use, the social role of the learner and eventual communicative events, as well as the various language functions and discourse skills required to manage different varieties of the language being learned (Richards, 2006). Fundamental to creating “real” communicative opportunities in the L2 classroom has been the notion of authenticity (Widdowson, 1998; van Lier, 1996), primarily as a way of making language learning more relevant and responsive to the cultural dimension of the target language (Damen, 1987; Kramsch, 1995). Current trends in CLT foreground meaningful communication achieved through interpersonal exchange and interesting content, with an emphasis on a holistic perspective of language competence. Communicative approaches see L2 development as involving both inductive and deductive learning of normative structures and conventions of language use as well as reflecting on the language learning process in order to attain equal levels of accuracy and fluency in the new language (Richards, 2006). In addition, learner autonomy – the idea that learners construct their own learning goals and content (Little, 2007b; van Lier, 1996) – is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of CLT.

#### 4.1 Action-based language learning and teaching

Within the larger domain of CLT, a number of approaches have developed which have shifted from a strict focus on learning outcomes to include a consideration of the process of language learning (Piccardo, 2010). Action- or task-based language teaching makes use of tasks as the fundamental component of language teaching. In the European context this approach is known as the action-oriented approach, or *l'approche actionnelle*. Language is seen as action, with emphasis on achieving a particular objective through language use, rather than seeing the use of language as an end in itself. Furthermore, the language learner is seen as being “in the process of becoming a language user” (CEFR, p. 43) with language learning as only one type of language use:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. (p. 9).

The action-oriented perspective has been taken up in Europe as an extension of CLT by building on meaningful communication in the classroom, but with emphasis on “active” learning. This pedagogic shift, from language to language users, reconceptualizes learners as “social agents” – that is, as members of society with particular investments in the things they do, in their environment, and in their interactions with others. Going from communicative to action-oriented language teaching means creating concrete, meaningful, and relevant situations for students and envisioning the L2 classroom as a social, collaborative, action-oriented linguistic envi-

ronment (Perrot, 2010). Puren (2006) has described the communicative approach as based on four basic characteristics: inception (an emphasis on beginning or initial linguistic encounters), brevity (adherence to efficient and prompt transfer of information), self-sufficiency (generalizable or decontextualized communication), and individuality (the individual as primary actor in a communicative event or interaction with only one other individual). In this way, the communicative approach contrasts with an action-oriented perspective which aims to teach students to understand the world around them in terms of its historicity, continuity, and collectivity, and to consider the way in which these are interrelated.

Accordingly, Puren's characterization represents a useful heuristic in providing some insights into the action-oriented approach of the *Ja genau!* series when compared to the communicative perspective represented in North American textbooks. For example, the story approach taken in *Vorsprung* which revolves around the experiences of an American exchange student in Germany with much of the content framed in terms of "a first encounter" with people, land, and customs. This inchoative aspect necessarily involves brief encounters, a common feature of the dialogues not only *Vorsprung* but also in *Kontakte* and *Treffpunkt*, most of which are sparsely formulated and leave out substantial discursive elements (e.g. pauses, reformulations) and other linguistic resources speakers typically use to establish a coherent interaction (Hall, 1995). Furthermore, most of the communicative tasks involving oral production are geared towards individual students, offer no connection to other tasks except by topic, or provide students with a means of situating themselves as active participants in a particular context. All three textbooks prioritize "university student" perspectives that are centred on classroom and campus experiences, city life, or travelling, with the main objective to provide communicative resources that enable students to understand, talk and write about their life at university. The overriding communicative activity involves description – describing themselves, their preferences and responsibilities, their environment, daily interactions and activities, their ideal partner, job, and travel destination – all which are based on the assumption that this information is new and interesting to those who are there to listen. The end result is that these communicative-based textbooks offer a narrow range of communicative activities and topics, as well as a visible lack of contextualized content (Olsen, 2000, Snider, 2005).

By comparison, the *Ja genau!* textbooks move beyond mere description by encouraging communicative activities that generally focus on how to get things done (in German). This might entail asking friends what the weather is like in their part of the country, finding a suitable apartment from a selection of online advertisements, applying to take a driver's licence test, or negotiating the price of a used camera at the flea market. In this sense, much of the content and tasks in the *Ja genau!* series locate students' German-learning experiences in a much broader field, highlighting daily activities at work and in the home, and foregrounding interactions with other speakers or groups of speakers and the various perspectives that shape these interactions. Consequently, the organization and management of individual themes and subtopics is more varied and relevant in the *Ja genau!* textbooks.



With regard to the email in Figure 2. above, Puren's characterization allows us to identify this instance of language use as action-oriented in a number of ways. The email makes reference to an event (the operation) as a previously mentioned matter and therefore situates it historically as a pre-existing concern in that student's life. In that sense, the email thus functions as a reminder about the reason for the student's absence as opposed to a first-time requesting that her absence be excused. The student's clarification that her being tired is not a reason for concern ("Alles is gut") brings in the interactional aspect of our teacher-student relationship by positioning me as someone who, as her instructor, takes an interest in students' well-being. In sum, the correspondence demonstrates that the student is able to successfully manage language use as situated, enduring, open and social.

## **4.2 Task-based language learning and teaching**

As noted above, process-oriented language learning has embraced the notion of task as a primary unit of syllabus design and teaching (Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris). In the European context, "la tâche" or "task" is at the centre of an action-oriented approach and is defined by the Council of Europe as "a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and a specific outcome" which require the "strategic activation of specific competences" (CEFR, p. 166). This understanding of communicative task includes a distinction between "pedagogic tasks," which are limited to the formal learning context (i.e. the classroom), and "real-world tasks," which respond to learners' professional, educational, or personal needs. For both types of tasks the emphasis is on meaning, based on the idea that successful task completion requires learners "to comprehend, negotiate and express meaning in order to achieve a communicative goal" (p. 158).

In North America, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been characterized within the larger context of CTL as based on the meaningful use of language, that is, as an activity that prioritizes meaning in connection with the real world, and where the outcome provides the basis for its assessment (Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996). Similarly, within cognitivist SLA, Ellis has described tasks as "requir[ing] learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed" (2003, p. 6). Willis, in turn, has specified tasks as involving the use of language with a focus on "the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome" (1990, p. 127). Alternatively, tasks have been defined in terms of different types of classroom interaction, with a task-oriented approach described as involving the teacher as facilitator and students as managing the interaction almost entirely on their own (Seedhouse, 1996). In contrast, an earlier definition had described tasks as sequences of problem-solving activities that involve both learners *and* teachers in the joint selection of the necessary resources to accomplish particular goals (Candlin, 1987). Ultimately, however, North American conceptions of task very much resemble and undoubtedly inform the current European action-oriented definition presented above.

Extremely useful in understanding the use of task as a foundational unit of teaching is Willis' detailed discussion of how exactly a sequence of tasks is "built around a series of activities in which learners focus primarily on the exchange of meanings" (2008, p. 1). This is in contrast to the well-established Present-Practice-Produce (3P) approach still evident in North American German language textbooks. Willis identifies three primary phases in a sequence of tasks: 1) an introduction to the task by way of some linguistic input, 2) the task itself, and 3) a focused study of the language being used. The introductory text may be in audio-/visual or print form and often involves a subsidiary task, such as brain-storming, a gap-fill drill, or some other form of "priming" (p. 3), all of which provide an opportunity for students to expand their communicative resources. The task is itself divided into three phases, "task → planning → report," which entails doing the task and then reporting to the class about its outcome, the presentation of which is planned out by the students as an intermediary step. An important element of the planning stage is students' orientation to the language forms they are using in order to best choose the ones most appropriate for the task. Within a task-based approach, this focus on the formal properties of language therefore still constitutes a meaning-focused activity, which is different from "a focus on form in which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 5). In this way, task-based teaching provides an important distinction from the prevailing 3P-approach, where *presentation*, *practice*, and *production* figure as primary learning activities (Skehan, 1998). This more traditional methodology sees presentation and practice as involving the manipulation of language forms identified by the teacher as a way of leading the learner to spontaneously produce meaningful language. However, the lack of emphasis on situated language use and the teacher-initiated focus on particular linguistic forms outside a meaning-centred context greatly reduces the level of creative language use:

A focus on form at the beginning of the sequence is likely to detract from a focus on meaning. There is a strong possibility that learners will be more concerned to reproduce the required forms than to work freely with the language they have at their disposal. The second reason is that the concern with the teacher nominated forms is likely to make other forms less salient. Learners will be preoccupied with one or two specific forms, to the detriment of other learning opportunities. (Willis, 2008, p. 12)

Conversely, when learners are oriented to focus first on language use, they tend to orient to what they find useful. Thus, we might say that what distinguishes *Ja genau!* from the North American textbooks is that the latter tend more easily towards a 3Ps approach whereas *Ja genau!* facilitates an action-oriented approach through its prioritization of communicative tasks, and as such constitutes at the very least "task-referenced language teaching" as defined in the North American context (Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

### Tasks in *Ja genau!*

This is evident by taking a more detailed look at the the *Ja genau!* textbooks. Although the units do not necessarily follow the strict task-based sequence described by Willis, each unit is structured for communicative activities that integrate “priming” and post-task analysis as meaning-making activities. At the A1 Level, all 10-page units are divided into several sections, each of which covers a topic centred on the main unit theme. Sections typically open with several examples of language use, often as a subsidiary pre-task activity or as a follow-up to a previously accomplished task. Students are invited to examine the language resources available to them only after the first primary communicative task, and often as a preparatory step leading up to a subsequent sequence of tasks under the same theme. Emphasis on grammar or pronunciation is achieved through inductive noticing as students are guided to formulate an explanation or linguistic practice in their own terms. According to Willis, focusing on form at a later stage during the sequence means that learners are more prepared to take notice of it, “not simply as an isolated form, but as something they have experienced in use” (2008, p. 12). This sequencing of a meaning-focused introductory stage, followed by communicative tasks and post-task analyses all lead up to a final collaborative “real world” activity at the end of each unit (often incorporating several smaller tasks) that requires the collaborative participation of the entire class.

In unit 7, for example, which focuses on daily routines and activities, the final section entitled “Meine Woche mit Oma,” begins with the story about five year-old Lukas spending a *week with his grandmother* (*Ja genau!* A1 Band 1, p.72-3).<sup>1</sup> The priming stage involves listening to a short audio text in which Lukas talks about his Oma’s upcoming visit for his birthday. Students are asked to indicate the correct birthdate and then follow up with a reading of the print version of the text to extend their understanding of the details of the upcoming visit. The first communicative task deals with “Öffnungszeiten” in which students pair up to read through several signs announcing summer *opening hours* for a variety of establishments – the zoo, the train museum, the outdoor pool, the café, the library, etc. – in order to identify month, day and time of accessibility. The next task requires students to organize a timetable for Lukas and his grandmother that incorporates eight activities, such as “schwimmen gehen” (*swimming*), “Eis essen” (*going out for ice cream*), and “Karten spielen” (*card games*), for example. A subsequent question-answer task provides a focus on form which has students consider how to ask someone what they are doing on a certain day and how such a question might be answered. This task concludes with students being asked to talk about their weekly routine as lead-up to the final collaborative communicative activity, which centres on a discussion and planning task of weekly leisure activities based on an excerpt from a newspaper’s entertainment section. Thus, throughout the entire sequence of tasks, students remain focused on a coherent communicative engagement with language, and with formal aspects of language examined inductively as part of meaning-based activities.

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<sup>1</sup>The text can be accessed via the textbook preview on the publisher’s website [<http://www.cornelsen.de/jagenau/>].

### Layout

An important organizational feature of these task-sequences is found in the overall lay-out of the *Ja genau!* textbooks. The clearly laid-out units feature simply worded instructions that are supported by colourful clip art and photos. Five instructional icons are introduced at the beginning of each volume and are used consistently throughout to alert the reader to different types of learning tasks – a CD icon for listening comprehension, two speech bubbles to represent working with a partner, a book with a page number to point students to a related page in the textbook, and so on. The main content pages include a 6-cm wide, right-hand margin to highlight directly relevant language resources: conjugated verb forms, lexical items (e.g., numbers, colours), regional variations (e.g., *die Tüte*, *das Sackerl*, *der Sack* for “bag”), and other information in both text and/or pictures to guide and support students in the completion of the tasks on that page. The result is a concise, clearly arranged and easy to follow presentation of content, with a contextualized focus on language immediately accessible yet without interrupting the flow of the sequence of tasks.

An apt demonstration of how the layout facilitates meaning-centred interaction is found in Unit 4 on “grocery shopping” (Band 1). In the first three sections of this unit, students encounter a varied selection of items to be found at a market – fruit and vegetables, clothes, and second-hand items. In addition, students familiarize themselves with quantifiers such as “ein Kilo” (*a kilo*), “ein Pfund” (*a pound*), “eine Flasche” (*a bottle of*) and pricing. A number of communicative and language-centred tasks allow students to experience the use of these new words and expressions in specific situations with a focus on plural forms of nouns and third-person accusative pronouns. This leads students to a final task in which they are asked to independently interpret a short narrated interaction in which Maria, one of the book’s main characters, unsuccessfully attempts to obtain a clove of garlic for her tzatziki dip from a next-door neighbour. The story ends with Maria only able to procure tomatoes from another neighbour and settling on a tomato-onion salad instead (*Ja genau!* A1 Band 1, p. 43). Of interest here is the way in which students are able to work through this highly contextualized narrative with minimal external input (i.e. a dictionary) by relying on language encountered in the tasks leading up to this text, as well as linguistic resources and tasks accomplished in previous units. The two photos in the margin, one depicting Maria and her neighbour and the other a bowl of tzatziki, further facilitate interpretation of the text.

In sum, it is in part the variety, quantity, and sequencing of language knowledge in the *Ja genau!* textbooks that makes it a preferred teaching resource. North American textbook chapters tend to feature extensive vocabulary lists and much more comprehensive summaries of grammatical structures, either in separate sections with interspersed drills to practice these structures (e.g., *Treffpunkt*, *Kontakte*) or as part of the main content area, set apart in coloured boxes and accompanied by extensive explanations in English (e.g., *Vorsprung*). By comparison, the action-oriented approach of the *Ja genau!* series comes across as minimalist by presenting only situated and relevant language content and directing students’ attention to those semiotic resources required to accomplish a particular task. In so doing, it

provides students with the space to creatively seek out additional linguistic means by drawing on their own interests and experiences.

## 4.2 Situated Content

The most interesting aspect of the Maria-narrative presented above, is that the interaction depicted in the story does not follow a straightforward “textbook-type” scenario that sees Maria’s request quickly and effortlessly acquiesced with a predictable, straight-forward trajectory of events. Instead, we find a contingently negotiated exchange, with not just one but two neighbours, that produces an unexpected outcome – tomatoes instead of garlic – yet one that is appropriate and plausible in this situation and which students can easily relate to.

Leung (2013) highlights the need for a situation-oriented understanding of communicative competence in language textbooks that goes beyond the prevailing emphasis on discrete language forms, norms of use, and a teacher-centred “follow-the-rules” view characteristic of the 3P’s approach. Although the latter is “inherently friendly to language education because it lends itself to a describable and teachable knowledge base,” Leung observes that in actual communication language users have to put together various components of their knowledge and “exploit the relationships between them” (p. 135). In line with an action-oriented approach, Leung suggests that language competence must be “proactive,” that is, not simply replicating what has been learned but producing “new and different uses” (p. 140). Participating in social interaction means that language communication is always situated – “speakers in any given situation...make use of available linguistic and sociolinguistic resources to make meaning and to respond to others’ meaning(s) in context contingently” (p. 141). This also means that L2 teaching has to make room for the contingent nature of situated language use, as for example in the Maria-narrative discussed above.

Such contextualized language content is evident elsewhere in the *Ja genau!* series. Unit 5, for example, explores the “family” theme through a number of sub-topics that introduce students to a range of diverse instances of situated language use. The first section opens with two introductory tasks that consist of listening to and reading four short descriptions of families. Students are asked to associate each description with one of four photographs as well as a corresponding one-sentence summary from a list of four options. Unlike the “family-tree” scenarios in North American textbooks which typically present only one (traditional) type of family, in the *Ja genau!* unit a variety of families are described, each from the perspective of one of its family members. The different viewpoints represented here inevitably point to different kinds of family experiences, not only allowing for a more inclusive understanding of family but providing students different ways of describing and presenting their own families. This initial linguistic input is followed up with a dialogue that features a descriptive conversation about a family celebration in a restaurant. Here again the narrative is contextualized by the interactants’ particular points of view. Throughout the interaction the two speakers are trying to identify the various family members milling about the room. It is only at the end of the dialogue that we recognize the two

speakers as waiters working in the restaurant – an unanticipated and amusing discovery for the listener, but one that again situates the interaction in a specific time and place and to which students can easily relate (*Ja genau!* A1 Band 1, p. 49).

The same is true for the language input introduced in the next section, which features a phone call in which a young woman complains to a friend about an upcoming family visit that she has to undertake with her partner. In her complaint she elaborates extensively on her dislike for some of the relatives and expresses her frustration with the unavoidable visit. Here again, students are presented with a sample of contextualized discourse that is relevant and believable, and which displays a wide range of situated uses of linguistic resources (e.g., possessive articles, modal verbs) that students can then draw on to express their position vis-à-vis the people they like or dislike (family, neighbours, friends, etc.).

The final section of this unit presents both oral and written instances of excusing a sick family member from school. Students first listen to a phone conversation in which the mother explains to the school secretary that her son has a fever, with the secretary reminding the mother to also send a written note to school. A template for the written note is provided as a cloze text in addition to the dialogue transcript (*Ja genau!* A1, Band 1, p. 52). The template is replicated below in Figure 3:

Mannheim, 20. März 2010
Liebe Frau Maierbeck,
_____ Sohn Sascha ist _____. Er _____ kann heute nicht zur Schule _____. Bitte entschuldigen Sie sein Fehlen.
Mit freundlichen Grüßen, Anna Fischer

Figure 3. Cloze text template of absence note.

The specificity of this example of language with details such as names, dates, symptoms, and so on, again provide rich, situated instances of language use that students can draw on to formulate an excuse for their own purposes, such as having to miss a class due to an operation, as discussed earlier.

When compared to North American textbooks, the six content pages covering this unit at first glance appear selective in terms of grammar instructions and lexical content. *Treffpunkt* and *Kontakte* present an extensive list of family-member terminology, all six modal verbs at the same time, and the entire set of (nominative and/or accusative) possessive articles in table format. However, this top-down presentation of decontextualized language forms and vocabulary items in no way encourages students to make use of this newly learned knowledge in a relevant manner. While it is entirely feasible (and surely common practice among motivated language students) to memorize entire tables of conjugated verbs or declined articles, it does not guarantee that this knowledge will be utilized when a situation arises in which that knowledge might be useful. Learning to associate the use of a modal verb with a

specific situation while accomplishing a particular task produces a meaningful experience that students can draw on in the future. More importantly, it encourages students to become autonomous learners/users who are able to direct their own language learning experiences.

#### 4.4 Themes

The emphasis on situated language content is also evident in the thematic organization and the diversity of communicative activities characterizing the *Ja genau!* textbooks. Each 2-volume set (Band 1 and 2) is divided into 14 units spanning a wide range of topics, providing students with the necessary linguistic resources to communicate about and participate in everyday activities and to interact successfully with the people around them. Themes in the first two volumes (A1: Band 1 und Band 2) include communicative tasks that require personal descriptions as well as engagement with home, educational, and professional activities and settings. These themes are revisited in subsequent volumes, but under different topics, in widely differing, highly specific situations of increasing communicative complexity. For example, the issue of health is first touched upon in the “family” unit (Einheit 5, Band 1) where the situation of a sick family member leads to a number of activities and interactions related to ill health. The theme reappears in a unit on “Einkaufen” (*shopping*) (Einheit 10, Band 2) in connection with healthy food choices, and later more extensively in a unit entitled “Gesundheit” (*Physical health*) (Einheit 12, Band 2) in the form of interactions with health professionals and with a focus on medical appointments and talking about one’s body. Subsequent volumes, at higher competency levels, continue to revisit the issue of well-being in association with nutrition, sports and leisure activities, emotional awareness, and future life plans.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in each instance, the issue of health is approached from a very different angle, in a specific situation, engaging use of previously encountered lexical, grammatical and pragmatic resources, yet each time differently contextualized in connection with new language forms, vocabulary, and so on. While only Unit 12 is explicitly related to the issue of health, the theme is revisited across other contexts by virtue of the communicative activities encountered in those settings.

Admittedly, this type elaboration of themes across units or chapters is also a design feature of North American German language textbooks. The difference here is that overarching themes and related language content appear to be mainly informed by the progression of grammar topics. This is possibly also the reason why content is presented as a comprehensive and stable entity of acquirable knowledge, without implications for its use in specific situations. For example, a unit titled “Der Körper” (*The body*) in chapter 1 of *Kontakte*, includes a decontextualized vocabulary display of body parts with a communicative focus on knowing how to name parts of the body. A similarly decontextualized list of illnesses and ailments follows in Chapter 11 entitled “Krankheiten” (*Illnesses*), again for the purpose of describing one’s own or others’ health condition. Ultimately, there is no visible connection made be-

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<sup>2</sup> See Units 9 and 11 of level A2 (Band 2), and Unit 6 of level B1 (Band 1).

tween these units in terms of their related thematic connection. Each topic is presented for the sake of being able to discuss the topic rather than to provide linguistic resources with which students learn to engage with the topic across different types of social contexts and settings. The learning tasks thus primarily centre on memorizing extensive lists of words or phrases, which contributes to the sense of unmanageability and narrow range of communicative activities alluded to earlier. Conversely, the action-oriented approach of *Ja genau!* relies on instances of situated language use which are supported by the range and quantity of language content included in a particular unit. In this way, use of previously acquired language forms are more efficiently integrated into new communicative tasks across a variety of situations that are interconnected through recurring themes. In the end, this also contributes to the manageability of content, despite the extensive range of topics and perspectives on each theme and newly encountered communicative resources in the *Ja genau!* textbooks.

## Conclusion

The CLT movement has developed in various directions over the past few decades, alongside a growing interest in conceptions of language communication as social practice and an emphasis on usage-based approaches to language learning. Despite the multi- and plurilingual realities of today's superdiverse societies (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), curricular resources in L2 education have barely kept step with this reality. Substantial developments and theoretical insights in SLA and applied linguistics research have advocated for a shift from discrete to holistic language learning, from teacher-centred to learner driven approaches, and from an emphasis on form-focused to communicative teaching. However, instead of leading to a shift away from traditional instructional practices, new ideas have mostly been "incorporated [...] into established ways of teaching" while maintaining the old "structural, knowledge-oriented framework" (Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, p. 5). Consequently, notions of the "native speaker model" and static, monolingual-oriented understandings of language and communication persist in textbook approaches commonly used in North America.

In my presentation of the *Ja genau!* textbooks I have sought to demonstrate how my positive experience with the A1-Level volumes is primarily due to the action-oriented/task-based approach presented by the series. Despite the textbooks' emphasis on the social, cultural, and linguistic integration of newcomers in a German L1 context, the content was easily adapted to a university German L2 classroom. Key elements that made this methodology so successful included the following: 1) an orientation to language use as action; 2) the sequenced progression of communicative tasks within a meaning-based context, with relevant language forms explored inductively and included as supplementary resources; 3) the use of situated language content highlighting the interrelated uses of language resources across different themes and settings; and 4) the explicit foregrounding of plurilingual language users as the identity category of choice facilitated in part by code choice.

Many of today's textbooks constitute the primary language source for students and yet are based on a limiting conception of language that presents learners with seem-



ingly insurmountable challenges in becoming a legitimate and expert user of an additional language. Based on my experience, the *Ja genau!* textbooks presented a welcome alternative in offering my students a productive means of entering into an unfamiliar communicative environment.

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