

Some *fundamentals* for teaching and learning German¹

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Wie viele Deutsche braucht man, um eine Glühbirne zu wechseln?

Einen. Wir sind effizient und haben keinen Humor.

– Anonymous

1. Introduction

German is no fun at all, right? Conventional wisdom holds that German is a difficult language to learn – *Deutsche Sprache, schwere Sprache* – that Germany is a serious and sober place – *Das Land der Dichter und Denker* –, and that Germans are stereotypically efficient and do not have a sense of humour – the epigram says it all, and yet it is often accompanied by the truly un-self-ironic, joke-killing explanation “Die Antwort ist verblüffend humorlos.” Given the sobriety of German and the common experience that, despite advances in theoretical approaches to language teaching over the last four decades, much Modern Languages teaching still resembles *drill and kill*, one would be forgiven for thinking that “fun” and “teaching German” do not mix. But they can and, for the sake of our classroom learners, they should. Fun might be an especially effective – or efficient – way of making classroom learning more meaningful. But the kind of fun I suggest, might not be the same as the kind of things one most often associates with fun. I do not take a genre approach to integrating fun into the classroom, such as simply suggesting using film or song. There is no guarantee that teaching a film or listening to a song in a German language class will be fun, and not a buzzkill. Rather, in the following, I soberly explore the meaning of fun and the kind of fun characteristics likely most suitable for the language classroom. I also describe three ways to make common classroom activities more fun and effective for learning German.

¹ This article is based on the keynote address, “Verstehen Sie Spaß im Unterricht?” presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Teachers of German (CATG) in Toronto on February 20, 2015.

2. The meaning of “fun”

According to the online *Oxford living dictionaries* (Oxford University Press, 2017), “fun” means “enjoyment, amusement, or lighthearted pleasure”; the word derives from the late seventeenth century when it referred to “a trick or hoax” and is a “variant of late Middle English *fon*,” meaning “‘make a fool of, be a fool’.” Wikipedia (2017) is amusingly informative on the matter of “fun,” describing it as “the enjoyment of pleasure, particularly in leisure activities,” characterizing it as “short-term,” being “not cerebral and generally purposeless,” and a “distraction [...] from any serious task.” Wikipedia illustrates “fun” with pictures of people jumping about in the surf or fountains or on each other, having snowball fights or pillow fights, or bowling. It also draws attention to how “fun” may occur during “recreation,” at “work [or] social functions,” or in day-to-day tasks, that people vary in what they consider to be fun, and that “[t]here are psychological and physiological implications to the experience of fun.”

The closest German word in meaning to the English “fun” is “Spaß.” The online version of the *Duden* (Bibliographisches Institut, 2017d) defines “Spaß” as an “ausgelassen-scherzhafte, lustige Äußerung, [...] die auf Heiterkeit, Gelächter abzielt; Scherz” and “Freude, Vergnügen, das man an einem bestimmten Tun hat.” Its origin is not German, but Italian and before that Latin: “älter: Spasso < italienisch spasso = Zeitvertreib, Vergnügen, zu: spassare = zerstreuen, unterhalten, über das Vulgärlateinische zu lateinisch expassum, 2. Partizip von: expandere = auseinanderspannen, ausbreiten, aus: ex = aus und pandere = ausspannen, ausbreiten, ausspreizen.” Here we again see light-heartedness in diversion.

Another possible translation of “fun” and (near) synonym of “Spaß” is “Scherz,” which *Duden* (Bibliographisches Institut, 2017c) traces via the verb “scherzen” to the activity of jumping: “mittelhochdeutsch scherzen = lustig springen, hüpfen, sich vergnügen, verwandt mit scheren in dessen ursprünglicher Bedeutung »springen«.” Wiktionary (2016b) underlines this etymology and original meaning of “to jump”: “From Middle High German *schërzen*, from Old High German **skërzan* (“to jump merrily, enjoy oneself, jest”), from Proto-Germanic **skertana*.” Incidentally, this time it is the German “Scherz” that has given us the Italian “scherzo.”

Other related German terms for “fun” include “Vergnügen,” “Freude,” “froh,” “Witz,” and “Lust.” Of these, two especially jump out. The online *Duden* (Bibliographisches Institut, 2017a) reveals that “Freude” has derived from the “mittelhochdeutsch *vröude*, althochdeutsch *frewida*, *frouwida*,” and is related to “froh,” which stems from the “mittelhochdeutsch *vrō*, althochdeutsch *frao*, *frō*,” meaning “lebhaft, schnell, dann: erregt, bewegt, vielleicht ursprünglich = hüpfend” (Bibliographisches Institut, 2017b). Wiktionary (2016a) traces “Freude” back to jumping in approximately 3500 BC: “From Middle High German *vrowede*, from Old High German *frouwida*, *frewida*, from Proto-Germanic **frawiþō* (‘joy’), from Proto-Indo-European **prew-* (‘to jump; hop’).” In sum, definitions of “fun” refer to joy, pleasure, and leisure in various forms; it might be short-term, spontaneous, and

distracting and is neither serious nor necessarily purposeful; it can make you feel good, laugh, and even want to jump.

3. What do second language acquisition theory and second language education scholarship tell us about fun?

Second language acquisition (SLA) theorists and second language education (SLE) scholars have developed several principles concerning effective second language teaching and learning over the last fifty years. Fun does not usually feature among them. The following is a synopsis:²

- A respectful, positive, and rewarding learning environment supports second language acquisition.
- Practice does *not* make perfect; that is, drills are not effective, especially when they are without meaning and context.
- Learners require exposure to the real (authentic) and varied language of speakers of the target language (often modified; always comprehensible).
- Learners must be exposed to and use the kind of language that they want and need for their own interests and purposes.
- Language acquisition is a creative process through which new knowledge is processed in relation to prior knowledge.
- Learners must be provided with opportunities for unrehearsed and meaningful language use (output) in purposeful interaction, where they take informed risks, make choices, develop language awareness, and negotiate meaning while seeking solutions to genuine queries.
- Teachers ensure that activities are interconnected and organized with clearly specified objectives and promote the desire to learn.
- Teachers should elicit self-correction, enable personalized feedback, and consider learners' individual developing language systems (interlanguage).
- Teachers must set learners activities that help them notice language forms; induction / discovery is preferable to deduction / presentation; teachers should (explicitly) instruct from the context of activities where meaning is primary.
- The whole language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be integrated.
- Teachers evaluate learners in a formative manner and in terms of the process of achieving a goal; learners need to evaluate their own performance and progress.

² To compile this bullet list, I have drawn especially from Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), Candlin (2001), Ellis (2002, 2003), Long (1991), Nunan (1991, 1993), Ortega (2009), Richards and Rodgers (2001), Samuda and Bygate (2008), Skehan (1998, 2003), and Willis (1996).

The underlying presupposition of effective second language teaching and learning is that acquisition is positively influenced and motivated by a worthwhile and achievable goal (output) and the frequency and quality of communication. One acquires a second language through meaningful and intentional – that is, *purposeful* and *goal-oriented* – interaction. But fun – joyful, jumping fun – is a form of distraction and *generally purposeless*. Thus, the problem arises whether it is possible at all to teach German effectively and have fun at the same time. Is *purposeful fun* even possible? Does purpose not take the fun out of “fun” and, vice versa, fun take the purpose out of “purposeful”?

Perhaps the incompatibility of purposefulness and (*generally purposeless*) fun explains the paucity of published scholarly works on “fun” in the “German language classroom” – or “modern language classroom.” After conducting several searches using variations of those terms in scholarly databases, my university library catalogue, and the Internet, I found hardly any scholarly items from the last four decades that mention having fun as a constituent of teaching and learning languages. Savignon (1976) describes a few activities for the communicative classroom as “fun,” including real-life scenarios, using gestures when teaching, and games and discussions in small groups; but Bimmel, Kast, and Neuner (2011) mention fun only in passing. Claerr and Gargan (1984) and Failoni (1993) take a genre or form approach, arguing that songs and music in the classroom are fun and motivating and can increase skills and cultural awareness in foreign language classes. Gabriel (2011) makes a similar case for using computer games in German first language classes. Von Wörde (2003) finds that students have less foreign language anxiety when teachers make class “fun.” But, as an example of the possible incompatibility of fun and learning languages, Belz (2002) indicates, in her discussion of an American-German telecollaborative project, that the German student participants saw the email correspondence designed for language learning as just a bit of fun, which the grade-conscious American undergraduates did not find funny at all.

4. What are the forms and nature of fun?

In addition to jumping in fountains and writing emails for a lark, fun can take on various forms. It might comprise social and/or physical interaction with family and friends, cooking a meal or going out to eat or for tea or a coffee or an alcoholic beverage, going dancing or to a party, going to the beach to swim or sunbathe, hiking, going on holiday to a resort town or a historic and cultural centre, going to an art gallery or museum, playing all kinds of sports, playing cards or board games, or the lottery and gambling, bungee jumping and other such physical (and psychological) risks, singing and making or listening to music, reading the newspaper or a book, writing a journal, letters, poetry, or a novel, using social media, drawing and painting, going to the movies, watching TV, taking photographs, making streaming videos, playing computer games, smoking, taking recreational drugs, and so forth. These and many other activities (forms of fun) will vary in the experience of

joy (degree of fun) that they provide individuals. For some, some of these activities will not be fun at all.

Several of these activities are already integrated into language learning curricula. Excerpts of, or entire, novels and films, for example, offer serious linguistic and cultural input and can be fun to read and watch. Other activities, such as playing cards and board games would also provide linguistic and cultural input while being fun. Some, like bungee jumping or lighting up, are of course not to be recommended for language acquisition. But it is less knowing specific forms of fun than their characteristics that best informs teaching and learning languages.

In general, these potentially fun activities have certain characteristics in common (nature of fun). They tend to be about being or working together, though sometimes they might be about being, or doing something, alone. They tend to require communication, elicit laughter, provide for sharing or exchange. They are often about being active (intentionally), adventurous, creative, and reflective. They involve receiving, discovering, researching, or inventing. One might strive to win something or take part in a friendly competition. But there are personal, institutional, cultural, legal, and/or practical limits.

These characteristics of fun appear to bear as much resemblance to the tenets of SLA and SLE as to *generally purposeless* distraction and *taskless* leisure. If that is the case, if *purposeful fun* were a principle of SLA, it might materialize in classroom teaching and the language curriculum as project work of all kinds – so long as there is a genuine research goal of personal interest and a public, socially interactive presentation that requires an attentive audience with some corresponding task. Likewise, *purposeful fun* would surely emerge through tasks of all kinds – so long as they have the realistic goal of discovering, explaining, winning, or achieving something. Singing too would be an example of *purposeful fun* – but only if memorizing the lyrics represents a personal goal and pleasure from achievement or serves the purpose of performing in public for others' entertainment, and in either case not merely as a distraction or to pass the time. Thus, teaching languages with a task-based approach in mind is one way to ensure integrating fun.

5. From boring textbook activity to purposeful fun

Much classroom language teaching in schools and universities is driven by textbooks. Unfortunately, modern language textbooks do not often succeed in following the principles they espouse (see Plews, 2013), nor can they be described as characteristically about togetherness or otherwise thoughtful solitude, genuinely purposeful communication, laughter, sharing, activity, adventure, creativity, discovery and research, friendly competition, and so forth. In the following pages I describe uncomplicated, user-friendly ideas for having purposeful fun with three very common textbook-based activities that are usually anything but fun: the (opening) dialogue, the reading comprehension, and the (extended) listening comprehension. I believe these examples of applying the social, communicative, discovery-oriented, and

creative characteristics of fun to make common basic activities more enjoyable and effective will be more useful than descriptions of potentially fun projects that might or might not be entirely relevant to a given classroom or syllabus. These ideas are influenced especially by the task-based teaching framework explored by Willis (1996).

5.1 The once boring dialogue can be fun and effective for learning after all

Many language textbooks begin a new chapter with an audio dialogue. In fact, the primary purpose of the dialogue is structural, as part of the organization of a unit. By providing a limited amount of either artificial or authentic input, the dialogue serves to introduce vocabulary and content for basic comprehension that will very likely be expanded upon in combination with grammar across the chapter. To the immediate end of basic comprehension, students are to listen to the dialogue – or read it or read it aloud – and provide oral and/or written answers to prepared questions. What seems to be an opportunity for listening practice can resort to a reading comprehension. Sometimes this is followed by a listen-and-repeat exercise for the sake of pronunciation practice. Although thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students undertake this standard activity several times across a semester, it is not an especially exciting exercise and its effectiveness is likely quite minimal. The goal of the dialogue is not naturally inherent, as an act of communication, but extrinsic, to set the scene for the rest of the chapter. There is no personally worthwhile goal in this activity; there is no inherent reason for the student to listen to the dialogue. Any chance of the sounds, words, and meanings of the dialogue having any genuine relevance to the students is lost in the requirement to listen to the dialogue not for the sake of attending to successful interaction but, rather, to complete a set of previously prepared questions that would never be part of the interaction if it were to take place in the real world.

So why not make this common activity more fun by making it relevant and purposeful by focusing on successful interaction as the goal and not on peripheral questions? The purpose of dialogues, then, should be to have the dialogue, to comprehend the interaction by taking part in the interaction.

My suggestion would be to task the students to listen carefully to the dialogue (with books closed!) in order to recompose and act it for themselves. The goal would be to re-compose the dialogue to such a degree that, in then performing it, the students would have to attend to the words and meanings sufficiently for their interaction to be meaningful and understood by others and therefore also successful; that is, if they miss or mangle parts of the interaction, the communication will break down. Students would work in pairs or, preferably, in small groups. Different groups would listen for the lines of a particular speaker in the dialogue. The dialogue would be played several times over, with breaks between each full play for in-group consultation, and each member of the group would note down what they believe they heard and understood and, then, the group would share their findings and discuss what they are still missing or have not yet grasped. After a few rounds (depending on the length and complexity of the dialogue), the groups would be invited to hold the

dialogue. The students will notice whether the interaction is successful or not depending on whether the parts of the dialogue match up; one group cannot respond appropriately to another if they do not get a sufficiently appropriate and comprehensible prompt. (Not all, but most students will notice if the dialogue is smooth enough or if something is going awry.) After the performance(s), the students can compare their versions with each others' and with the original (with the book open) in order to identify and notice missing parts of words or whole words and expressions. As for the textbook's prepared comprehension questions: they can still be completed as homework for review and writing practice and, given the now preceding purposeful activity, meaningfully contextualized focus on forms.

This is how I have taught using dialogues such as "An der Rezeption" in *Wie geht's?* (Sevin, Sevin, & Brockman, 2015, p. 196), which is an A1-level dialogue about a woman booking a single room for two or three nights in person with a hotel receptionist. The shtick is that the hotel can offer a double for the first night and a single for the other nights – which is quaint rather than funny. I divide the students into small groups so that they can attentively listen to the dialogue and work in teams to put together one of the roles as best as they can, and then perform it with a group that has attended to the other role. When the last two groups perform, having the advantage of further perfecting their versions on hearing previous groups' versions already, the rest of the class compares the performance with the original script in the textbook in order to notice any gaps, great (e.g., words and phrases) or small (e.g., gender and case of articles, adjective endings, etc.).

This activity can be exploited further by requiring the same groups then to create purposefully adapted versions and perform those too, with their audience tasked with noticing the changes or additions they have imagined. Or, the entire class could invent an adaptation by dictating new lines to a student or two who write the new version on the board. The class peers would edit this writing and then, for a final bout of fun, the instructor could direct the students to memorize the dialogue as they recite it standing up as a chorus, while – in order to add a little pressure – the instructor gradually erases words at random until there are only a few left.

I have found that by turning textbook dialogues into *purposeful fun* in this way, I can engage students in their learning much more than by the dull listening presentation of an artificial script followed by prepared questions. Not only can I encourage students to attend to the target language meaningfully and also their developing accuracy, fluency, and complexity, but they have fun in learning by interacting and working together, focusing on communication, communicating about communication, discovering, making personal contributions, sharing, exchanging, reflecting, re-creating and creating, sometimes inventing out of necessity, performing publicly, perhaps competing, certainly challenging themselves and others, and all the while smiling and laughing about their effort.

5.2 The random reading comprehension can be fun and effective for learning after all

Language textbooks also include at least one and sometimes more specially written or authentic texts per chapter for developing learners' reading comprehension. While they can sometimes seem random in choice and placement, they are often well crafted or carefully selected and tend to appear at or toward the end of the chapter for the additional purpose of expanding content delivery or cultural context – as if a reward for the preceding lexical and grammatical study. (I often believe these texts should come first – and regularly do move them up – in order to provide cultural motivation for the language study.) Following the textbook author's aim of applying new linguistic learning for reading comprehension development and cultural knowledge acquisition, students are to read the text and answer questions prepared by the textbook author. There is hardly any duller reading activity imaginable than reading because the textbook or teacher requires it. Of course, this is unnatural and unfun since the reason for reading here is extrinsic, while reading is most often intrinsic; one usually reads for one's own pleasure (though sometimes to someone for their pleasure) or to gather information to answer one's own questions or the questions of a group to which one belongs, that is, questions in whose answers one has a stake. Textbook reading comprehensions are reading for the sake of answers to questions that are not one's own and in which one often has little or no inherent interest.

Why are language students expected to read so unnaturally and use valuable class time to do it? Do they really develop their reading skills this way?

Besides moving the reading texts up in the order of chapter activities, to make the reading more fun, more personally relevant and purposeful, and more connected to reading development, I would suggest making the reading practice natural or realistic again. That is, the students could read for the genuine sake of reading if the activity were set up with an inherently self-interested motivation for reading. I would ask the students to engage with the reading in order to evaluate and improve their prior knowledge of the given topic. The goal, therefore, would be to read – authentically – to confirm or fill in the gaps in prior knowledge. Students would work individually, in pairs, or in small groups and start not by reading the text, but by trying to answer the questions positioned after the text without having read it. This way they can establish their current knowledge about the topic before reading; as a result, later, they will be motivated to find out if they are right or wrong and what else they can learn. They have, at first, only the title of the reading and the textbook's prepared questions to figure out the topic and develop their understanding of it. So, they will obviously have to make educated guesses – or even wild guesses if they are unfamiliar with the topic. Only once they have initial answers do they read the text, for at this point they have something or their own to work from and a genuine reason to read.

This fun and inquiry-based manner of reading comprehension and development works as well with literary as with non-fiction or disciplinary texts. For example, I have taught in this manner with reading comprehensions such as the A2-

level text “Die zwei Chefs” in *Wie geht’s?* (Sevin, Sevin, & Brockman, pp. 362-363), which the title and nine following prepared questions reveal is a third-person narration about a cleaner and, seemingly, her two bosses. The text is in fact about the narrator and the cleaner discovering their common interest in mathematics and the title is a phrase he uses to refer to his wife and god; that the students will likely have presumed something else until they read the text adds another layer of mystery. I ask the students to work in pairs or small groups to answer alternately the first or the second half of the questions as spontaneously as possible either in full formal sentences or detailed phrases, all without having read the text. Of course, they will not really know fully what to expect and so must guess or invent, which can be fun, creative, and even comical. The students record their answers on a sheet of paper that they exchange with another pair or group. Only at this point are the students to read the text. Only now do they have an inherent reason to do so. Rather than a random exercise, the reading comprehension is goal-oriented both because the students are curious to find out whether their answers are right or wrong as well as because they are tasked with evaluating and, if need be, correcting both the content and the language of another pair’s or group’s answers. They must read part of the text with genuinely conscious awareness and record their feedback on the others’ answer sheet before giving it back and getting theirs back in return. The class’s correct or corrected answers can be reviewed in plenum in order to bring the parts of the story together, check for linguistic accuracy, celebrate the effort of the group with the most correct answers originally or the most wildly creative wrong answers, as well as discuss the content in a way that highlights the students’ learning, that is, their presumptions and discoveries and perhaps the reasons for the difference.

Although this manner of teaching a reading comprehension is complete in and of itself, it could be extended by having students shift the genre of the text by turning it into dialogues or mini-dramas to perform to each other or, depending on the reading, setting a homework assignment to investigate the author, the excerpt’s source text, or the topic further and reporting back to the class.

Teaching textbook reading comprehension in this more purposeful and fun way, I have found that these often unmotivated and un motivating texts can come alive. The students read for their own sake and for the sake of providing information to others and thereby attend more consciously both to content details and to those linguistic features (especially vocabulary, but also subtleties such as adjectives, negation, clauses, etc.) that most precisely and efficiently convey that content. The students have fun working together, imagining and searching for answers and engaging in a little friendly competition to increase their knowledge both individually and collectively.

5.3 The interminable listening comprehension can be fun and effective for learning after all

Longer listening comprehensions can also be made more purposefully fun, engaging, and effective by consciously applying the characteristics of fun when (re-)

planning the standard textbook activity associated with them. I find that North American textbooks provide too few authentic and entertaining listening texts in general, let alone extended ones; new German editions following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages fare generally better in this regard. Yet the development of listening skills at the level of sustained attention is crucial for successful communication and interpretation especially for independent user and proficient user classifications (B1 through C2) given that much educational and cultural text is essentially half, if not entirely, aural (e.g., lectures, protracted conversation, debates, arguments, sermons, speeches, storytelling, telling jokes, song, poetry recitation, radio and TV broadcasts, film, etc.).

When textbooks include extended listening comprehension activities, they usually follow the same dull pattern as the abovementioned dialogues and reading comprehensions: the presentation of the listening text as one block of input followed by prepared questions. Just as with the other activities, I would suggest not teaching them in this way again because there is no basic inherent interest for the student to engage with the text. Besides, much of the useful content and linguistic detail and especially the rhetorical, stylistic, and structural elements of such extended listening texts tend to be glossed over or lost entirely when following the standard teaching procedure.

Instead, one could follow the suggestion for adapting standard reading comprehension described above, or introduce a type of matching and memory game as follows. This is what I do, for example, with the B1-level listening text “Die Popakademie Baden-Württemberg” in *Mittendrin* (Goulding, Strehl, & von Schmidt, 2012, pp. 294-295), one North American textbook that I have found to include several authentic, diverse, and challenging extended listening texts. This exercise concerns an authentic radio interview with a representative of the pop music university at the Frankfurt “Musikmesse,” or trade fair for music. I would suggest dividing the class into small groups and providing each group with copies of the script of the listening text available to instructors from the accompany resource manual (Goulding, Strehl, & von Schmidt, 2013); the text should be cut up into manageable segments and all mixed up. Interviews such as this lend themselves especially well to this activity because of the turn-taking, and different groups could even be given the separate roles of interviewer and interviewee. I would then ask the students to scan and identify the various pieces while volunteers read them aloud, in no particular order. As in a simple game, the groups draw on their initial comprehension to put the segments into an order that seems logical to them. Then, the students would listen to the audio recording, making a mental note of any differences between it and how they ordered the pieces of the text, without changing theirs. After the listening text is finished, the students rearrange their versions according to the original from memory and suggest why the order of the original – or even their own order – is better. This activity requires the students to attend to and discuss the content and its relation to stylistic or genre conventions. After this, the students can very likely answer the textbook questions by recall.

By teaching extended listening in this way, students have greater opportunity to notice the overall structural complexity of a spoken or aural text. They do so in a fun way since they are learning through cooperation and playing a basic intellectual game.

6. Conclusion: Recommending task-based language teaching with dialogues, reading comprehensions, and listening comprehensions

Each of the preceding adaptations of common language textbook activities draws especially on a task-based teaching framework in an effort to be more effective, that is, purposeful and meaningful, and fun at the same time. I believe that it is clearly possible – even strongly advisable – to teach and learn languages in a manner that is at once purposeful, goal-oriented, and fun. This is because tasks and fun share several characteristics, not in the least of which are: being and doing together (or otherwise a thoughtful solitude); genuinely purposeful communication and/or self-expression; being active or adventurous, creative, and/or reflective; sharing, exchanging, discovering, researching, or inventing something; and even taking part in friendly competition. Fun in German class should not be considered incompatible with or a diversion from teaching and learning. It is a constituent of it. So, let's jump to it!

7. References

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