

Working Title:

Lernen Sie Deutsch!

How to get the most from your language class abroad

Alternate Title 1:

Learning German in Germany

A Quick Guide to What You Need to Know

Alternate Title 2:

So you want to learn a language abroad?

Author's note: This article can be adapted to address a variety of audiences. It can for example, be tailored toward the interests of “adventure” or “budget” travelers, parents of high school or college age children, prospective students (customers) of any language, or targeted even more specifically toward German language students.

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Lernen Sie Deutsch!

How to get the most from your language class abroad

What could be more fun than learning Italian in Italy, or French in France? Or as I did this summer, German in Germany? Although it had been more than twenty years since I had studied German in a classroom setting, I found the experience to be a tremendous amount of fun, and a great way to refresh my language skills.

If you've ever considered a language course abroad (whether for yourself or a child), here are a few practical tips to help you get the most from your investment.

Set personal goals

The first thing you should do is to set a few realistic goals for your program. Obviously you aren't going to master an entirely new language in just a few short weeks. But if your goal is to build your vocabulary and learn how native speakers use the language, then you are on the right track already. By being "in-country" you will have more opportunities to learn and speak the language than would otherwise be possible. My personal goal was to feel at ease when speaking German and to dust off my grammar.

Choosing a school that fits your needs

With so much information being available on the Internet, finding the right school can seem a daunting task. Often your local community colleges or adult education programs can be a good source of referrals. Another strategy is to first identify the city (or cities) that are of most interest to you, and to then research your options through an organization such as The European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS). By searching the EAQUALS database you can easily find a member school in the language and location of your choice.

It is a fact of life that many of the best language schools are not experts at self-promotion, particularly when it comes to worldwide marketing. Many schools wisely choose to focus on their key strength, language instruction, and work with sales agents to promote their schools. In effect these sales agents are almost like travel agents, helping to match you with the type of school (language) and location (city or country) that suits you best. And like travel agents these specialists will do their best to find the right school for you. Even so, make sure that the school they recommend meets your standards.

You may also want to consider whether your potential school belongs to any professional industry organizations (for example EAQUALS, ALTO - Association of Language Travel Organizations, and so on), and whether the school specializes in teaching a single language, or a variety of languages.

And of course, regardless of the quality and reputation of the school you choose, it will be up to you to make the most of your time and studies abroad.

What to expect in the classroom

At the "did deutsch-institut" (Deutsch in Deutschland Institute) in Munich, instructors conduct the intermediate and advanced classes exclusively in German. The professional instructors themselves have an excellent command of English, but in the classroom you should expect to hear little, or more likely, no English. A typical course will be twenty to thirty hours of classroom instruction per week. For example, a twenty-five hour class may start at 9:00 a.m. and end at 1:30 p.m. How many weeks of instruction is up to you, but two weeks is generally the recommended minimum. I found that after two weeks I was ready for more, and could definitely imagine staying another two weeks!

Tip: If your school offers the option of either twenty-five or thirty hours, consider taking the thirty hour option. You will likely find that the additional five hours of instruction are taught in a smaller group setting, with more time for individual attention and more opportunities to hone your conversational skills.

Most schools pride themselves on small class sizes with a maximum of twelve to fifteen students. In addition to an interactive classroom environment, you can also expect to have homework assignments each day. Yes, homework. But don't worry; you will still have plenty of time after classes to see the sights.

Most students tend to be in their twenties, and come from around the world. During my two week course, I met students from no less than ten different countries including Italy, France, Poland, Slovakia, Georgia, Vietnam, Taiwan and China. Many were staying for three months (or more) to study German. Although they were a bit younger than me, I found it easy to make friends and fit in, although I admit I did not have the same passion for the disco that many did!

Continuous or fixed curriculum? Unless you have never studied your target language, you may have the flexibility of starting your course on any Monday. This is possible because many schools teach a 'continuous curriculum'. In other words, there is no one starting point in the curriculum, you simply join a course that is already in progress. Your experience level and arrival date will determine the material that you study. Despite this bit of serendipity, there is no experience that can compare to learning a language in its native country!

Excursions, activities, social events. Most schools offer one or two excursions per week, either in the afternoon or on the weekends. There is usually a nominal charge for transportation or entrance fees to museums and attractions. The more adventurous students (you know who you are) will want to strike out on their own.

How to prepare: what to know before you go

Visiting a foreign country can naturally be a little stressful when you don't know the language well. But the more you know what to expect, the easier it will be. Try to learn what your academic environment will be like beforehand.

Be sure to ask about class hours and homework expectations. It may be easiest to send an email to the school. Don't be afraid to write your email in English if you need to, as your school is probably staffed by a large number of people who speak and write English everyday. Likewise, don't be afraid to write or call your new school using your limited foreign language skills – they work with students every day!

Placement exams. While it is unlikely that you will be required to 'pass' an entrance exam, if you already have some language experience you will probably be offered a placement exam. It's a good

Quick Tips

- **Research the actual language schools** and not just the sales agent. Many excellent schools are represented around the world by partner firms.
- **Contact your school well in advance** to learn about course materials, placement exams, pace of instruction, and curriculum.
- **Live with a host family** to make the most of your experience. Not only will you learn more about the local culture, but you will also have many more opportunities to practice your language skills. Schools can provide you with information on hosting families.
- **Brush up on your basic language skills**, but don't overdo it. The goal is to be comfortable in simple everyday conversations – not to be stressed because you can't speak like a native.
- **Review key grammar terms** in your foreign language. Knowing words like "past tense", "gender", and "homework" will be helpful.
- **Consider the shoulder seasons.** Summertime is not always the best time to visit another country. If you want to beat the crowds and perhaps have a more intimate experience with smaller class sizes, consider taking your courses in Spring, Fall, or even (gasp!) Winter.

idea to ask your school if you can take the placement exam in advance of your arrival. If your visit abroad is brief, you can save valuable time this way.

Schools which are serious about the quality of their teaching will certainly adhere to the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” which provides a recognized standard for describing language skills levels. These levels are A1 and A2 for beginners, B1 and B2 for mid-level students, and C1 and C2 for advanced students.

Curriculum. One of the most important questions for you will be: *how hard or how easy will your course be?* What will the pace of instruction be like, and how many lessons per week will be covered? For example, a mid-level intensive course may cover two textbook chapters per week. Is the course continuous, or does it have a fixed curriculum? And what subject material is likely to be covered during your stay? Will it be a review of what you already know, or will it be completely new? Again, knowing what to expect can make your experience that much more enjoyable.

A sharp pencil, a desire to learn, and a few good books. Be sure to bring a good dictionary, and consider bringing a grammar book for additional study. If you wait to buy these things in the country you are visiting, you will probably find them a bit more difficult to understand – since they won’t be written for English speakers! A good grammar book can help clarify any challenging topics (such as conjugation, tenses, or word order) by providing a fresh explanation, in English.

Another good idea, if you have sufficient time beforehand, is to acquire the textbooks that you are likely to use in the school. This will give you a chance to familiarize yourself with the instruction (to a degree) in advance. The trick here is to determine which class level is right for you.

The language of language

Even if you are an accomplished language student, you may be in for a surprise. Most of the foreign language instruction you have received up until this point was probably in English. All too often, grammar concepts are explained in English. For example, if you studied French and learned about the past tense, present tense, and future tense, you probably learned these concepts in English. In the German language, the past tense is referred to as the “Präteritum” or the “Vergangenheit”. If you don’t know the native equivalents of the various linguistic terms, it would be very wise to review them before you go!

Read, Listen, Speak...GO!

Learning a language opens so many doors. Such as doors to exotic travel. Doors to new friendships and new job opportunities. And doors to personal growth. I believe wholeheartedly that the best way to learn a language is to live the language. And what better way to live a language than to travel abroad and immerse yourself in a new culture!

Best wishes in all your adventures,

Paul

Web Resources

- EAQUALS
The European Association for Quality Language Services
www.eaquals.org
- ALTO - Association of Language Travel Organizations
www.altonet.org

Popular Language Schools in Munich

- did deutsch-institut
www.did.de
- Inlingua
www.inlingua.com
- Goethe-Institute
www.goethe.de

[Optional for German Language Audiences]

German Linguistic Words

If your classes are conducted primarily, or exclusively, in German, you will find the following terms useful:

English	German
Word, Words	das Wort, die Wörter
Keyword	das Stichwort
Letter, to spell	der Buchstabe, buchstabieren
Sentence, Sentences	der Satz, die Sätze
Noun, Nouns	die Nomen, das Substantiv
Ending, Endings	die Endung, die Endungen
Gender	das Genus
Masculine/Feminine/Neuter	männlich/weiblich/sächlich
Separable verbs	die trennbare Verben
Regular/Irregular verb	regelmässig/unregelmässig Verb
Mixed verb	das Mischverb
Final clauses	die Finalsätze
Conditional clause	der Bedingungssatz
Conjunction	die Konjunktion
Expression, expressions	der Ausdruck, die Ausdrücke
Translation, to translate	die Übersetzung, übersetzen
Synonym	das Synonym
Difference (distinction)	die Unterscheidung
Identical	identisch
Opposite	das Gegenteil
Exception	die Ausnahme
Homework	die Hausaufgabe
Practice/Exercise	die Übung
Example	das Beispiel
Instruction	der Unterricht
Lesson	die Lektion
Meaning	die Bedeutung
to pass a test, to fail	bestehen, durchfallen
Present tense	die Gegenwart, das Präsens
Past tense, Simple Past	das Präteritum, die Vergangenheit, Imperfekt
Past Perfect, Pluperfect	Plusquamperfekt
Present Perfect (Conversational Past)	das Perfekt
Future	die Zukunft
Subjunctive (mood)	der Konjunktiv
Basic Level, Beginner	die Grundstufe, Anfänger
Mid Level	die Mittelstufe
Intensive Course	der Intensivkurs

10 reasons for learning German

1. Germany is the world's largest exporter.
2. German is the most commonly spoken language in the EU.
3. 18% of the world's books are published in German.
4. Germany is home to numerous international corporations.
5. German is no harder to learn to speak and write than other languages.
6. German is the second-most commonly used scientific language.
7. German is the language of Goethe, Nietzsche and Kafka. Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Freud and Einstein also spoke German.
8. Speaking and understanding German will deepen your knowledge of the culture and improve your employment opportunities.
9. Learning German provides deeper insights into a region that plays a vital role in central Europe's intellectual and economic life and in its cultural history.
10. In many regions, Germans account for the largest percentage of tourists.

(Source: Goethe-Institut web site, October 2005)