

Faculty Development Grant from the Bush Foundation Final Report

Report Date: June 6, 2005

Title of Project: Writing in German: Assessing the Gulf Between the Intermediate and the Advanced Level

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Grant section: 4a, 4b

Project timeline: July, 2004 – June, 2005

I. Project Description

The project's focus was on the written communication skills of Augustana students graduating with a major or minor in German. It was the intent of the project to assess the effectiveness of text-specific grammar and writing exercises introduced into the course MDFL 337 German Seminar: The German Song in History, taught in fall 2004.

The project was concluded within the proposed timeframe. During July and August, 2004, the course materials for MDFL 337 were revised and supplemented. The revision included a complete re-writing of the text used; the text was then supplemented by student worksheets.

The text and the worksheets were distributed to the students at the beginning of fall semester 04. During the semester, the materials were used as scheduled (see attached course syllabus).

After the course had concluded in December 04, all written student work was evaluated in the context of the course grade.

The analysis of the project took place from January to May, 2005. During the same time period, the decision was reached that, due to the success of the project, the writing materials should be further developed for "The German Song in History" and be expanded to other advanced German courses for which these materials are not commercially available or included in a commercially available, suitable textbook.

II. Assessment materials

Text: The text was completely re-written and its structure changed. As can be seen on the syllabus, chapter four is used as the first reading selection of the semester because the song of German Romanticism is central to the course. It appears as chapter four due to the text's adherence to chronology. The text difficulty in grammar and vocabulary

was adjusted to the language level of students having just completed Intermediate German II (the prerequisite for this course). The next reading assignments included chapter one, then chapter two, chapter three, chapter 5 etc., each chapter's text being slightly more advanced in difficulty than the text of the previous chapter.

Worksheets: The worksheets were completely integrated into the progression of the reading assignments from the text and consist of four parts, each part designed to reinforce chapter content and language (see attached worksheet chapter five):

1. Vocabulary exercises pertaining to the assigned reading
2. Grammar exercises using the vocabulary of the assigned reading
3. Detailed questions about the reading (short answers, complete sentences)
4. At the end of each chapter, students are asked to write an analysis of one of the songs heard and discussed in class.

III. Evaluation

The writings produced by the students in the end-of-chapter song analyses were carefully studied according to recurring grammatical errors. They were then compared to the same type of essay response in two recently taught advanced German courses,

- a. MDFL 334 History of German Literature II, fall 2002; and
- b. MDFL 332 German Conversation & Composition II, spring 2003.

IV. Outcome

Keeping in mind that the student population in both the two recently taught advanced German courses and in "The German Song in History" is small and does not consist of the exact same student group, the comparison was interesting: In the project course "The German Song in History", the percentages of correct forms in the specifically targeted areas of

verb forms/endings
verb tenses
adjective endings
comparative/superlative
conjunctions
relative pronouns and clauses

were consistently higher by approximately 30% when compared to similar writing assignments in MDFL 334 and MDFL 332.

The project did, at first, not include a comparison between student performance related to content and limited itself to the correct application of grammar. At the same time, content performance in the project course was higher than in MDFL 334 and MDFL 332.

V. Project assessment

It is difficult to attribute the overall higher student performance in the project course as compared to MDL 334 and MDL 332 to the project features alone. The variables that must be considered are the difference in student population as well as the difference in topic and therefore, course structure. The project outcome might suggest that a grammar review which is fully integrated into the course content will increase student performance also in the area of content. More projects involving this aspect of the role of grammatical correctness are needed to confirm that conclusion.

What seems clear in the context of this project, however, is that student writing in German is substantially improved by the introduction of a context-related grammar review that is integrated into course content.

The outcome of this project comes as no surprise and reinforces the notion that correct writing in a foreign language cannot be achieved by separating grammar from content, and that the relative mastery of grammar is a lengthy process spanning many years of language study. At the same time, it is essential to document the functions of different elements in a foreign language program in order to assess the overall quality of the program and ensure its constant improvement. This project was an important phase in the on-going assessment of Augustana's German program.

VI. Future assessment projects

The logical continuation of this assessment project is to expand its findings to all advanced German courses at Augustana in order to facilitate the transition from intermediate to advanced courses in the area of writing. In fall 2005, a new advanced German course will be taught, "The Literature of Romanticism". It would seem logical to use the method of course development and assessment for "The Song in German History" in this new course, which could serve to further test the validity of the outcome described above.

VII. Final comment

This project was stimulating and encouraging and produced clear results within less than a year. I would like to thank the Faculty Development Committee for accepting, and, Arlen Viste in particular, for encouraging me to submit the proposal. The Augustana German program has been strengthened through this project.

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