**GFL**

*German as a foreign language*

**Teaching Talk: should students learn 'real German'?**

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# Teaching Talk: should students learn 'real German'?

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This paper looks at the ways in which learners develop the skill of speaking German and questions the ways in which different speech styles are prioritised. It is observed that speech tends to be the skill which is concentrated on in the early stages of language acquisition, and that it is comparatively neglected at advanced level. As a result of the privileging of types of discourse which have more in common with written texts than with naturally-occurring speech – 'real German' – university students going abroad tend to have poor interactional skills and low levels of pragmatic knowledge, which makes it difficult for them to integrate and form relationships with their German-speaking peers. It is suggested that a study of the linguistic analysis of ordinary conversation can help students to improve their pragmatic competence and hence to have a more pleasurable and profitable encounter with the German-speaking world. Since the use of new media in communication has resulted in a diminution of the importance of formal writing, an increased understanding of spoken German is also a necessary skill for the students' future careers.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Progression in Language Learning

In the earliest stages of second language acquisition, communicative language teaching, like its immediate methodological predecessors, the direct and audio-visual methods, depends on the learner building up competence through listening, and speaking initially in conversational routines – memorised, unanalysed expressions which perform certain communicative functions – greeting, expressing thanks, apologising and so on (Ellis 1994: 84). In order to facilitate this kind of learning, which mirrors first language acquisition (Aijmer 1996: 7), language coursebooks for the beginner typically present the target language in the form of dialogues where each participant speaks briefly in a short turn, and which are structured around adjacency pairs, that is, utterances with a conventional, obligatory sequencing, such as greetings sequences (*guten Morgen - guten Morgen*) or expressions of thanks (*danke – bitte*). Although learners are introduced to these dialogues in recorded form, full transcripts are printed in the coursebook, enabling the learner not only to listen and repeat, but also to use the written version of the dialogue as an aid to committing the exact form

of the words to memory before attempting to embark on creative variation. This is a necessary stage, both because the most conventionalised structures are invariable, and because many of the structures memorised will not yet be grammatically analysable by the learner, who will acquire, for instance, *guten Morgen* before knowing that adjectives have endings, and *ich möchte gern* before understanding the concept of the subjunctive.

At more advanced stages of the course, the linguistic input is increasingly made up of originally written texts, rather than of transcribed spoken texts, and dialogues are utilised primarily in listening comprehension tasks. The nature of these exercises is to require learners to listen in the same way as they would to their native language, concentrating on the message rather than the medium: "im allgemeinen merken wir uns beim Hören nicht die einzelnen Formulierungen, sondern wir verarbeiten das Gehörte zu abstrakteren Informationseinheiten" (Schwitalla 1997: 26). At this level, the text of the dialogue is no longer printed in the coursebook, partly for fear that advance preparation by learners will negate the value of the listening comprehension task, but also because the form of this less routinized speech is not seen as intrinsically interesting by coursebook authors.[1] Thus audio texts are heard once or twice in the classroom and then become unavailable to the learners, whose primary linguistic input comes from the written texts which are offered as models for both written and spoken exercises. As an example, in *em Abschlusskurs* a text on the development of aspirin is the stimulus for a speaking task, holding a discussion about the ethics of medical research. Preparation for speaking consists of some brief suggestions of possible lines of argument, and a list of discursive *Redemittel /Redewendungen* such as "Lassen Sie uns folgendes Ergebnis festhalten: …", "Also, Sie haben mich überzeugt. Ich schließe mich Ihrem Vorschlag an" „Ich sehe Vorteile darin, dass..." (Perlmann-Balme et al. 1999: 98). This kind of presentational strategy, where learners are offered only the opening phrase or clause of what is expected to be a long conversational turn, is typical of almost all advanced learners' books: *Der treffende Ausdruck* offers examples

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[1] A typical example of this kind of progression is seen in the widely-used German series, *Themen neu*. In the first book of the series, intended for beginners, about two-thirds of each lesson is devoted to spoken dialogues, printed in full, whereas in the third book, aimed at advanced learners, the proportion of space devoted to speaking is reduced to about one third, with the associated printed text consisting of questions and related tasks rather than a transcript of the audio material (Aufderstraße et al. 1992 and 1998).

like "Ich muß Ihnen widersprechen", "Ich bin derselben Meinung" (Turneaure 1996: 31, 56). In these exercises learners are given to understand that a written text can be turned into a spoken one simply by being prefixed by a 'spoken expression'. Indeed, the authors of *Kenntnisse* even observe that forms like "Die Verhandlungen bleiben immer noch ohne Resultat" or "eine Änderung in den Details hat sich als notwendig erwiesen" are worth learning from memory for use "in both spoken debate and essay-writing" (Burke et al. 1999: 276-281).

It is clear from this brief summary that the nature of the spoken German that learners are expected to produce is perceived as developing away from the short turn with an interactional function – maintaining relationships between speakers – to the long turn with a transactional function, that is, transferring information. A series of assumptions and theories underlie the observed coursebook structure. Firstly, it appears that students need explicit instruction in speaking the foreign language only at the start, after which their native language rhetorical skills will enable them to do the rest. This is questioned by Brown and Yule, who argue that "simply training the student to produce short turns will not automatically yield a student who can perform satisfactorily in long turns" (Brown & Yule 1983: 19). A second pedagogical assumption emerges from one of the main tenets of the communicative approach, that "in real life as in the classroom, most tasks of any complexity involve more than one macroskill […] Where possible these skills should be integrated" in a communicative syllabus (Nunan 1989: 22). This notion of integration has led in practice to a blurring of the functions of different skills, which are presented to learners in terms of their communicative and functional similarities rather than in terms of their contrasts: essay writing and spoken debate are seen as fundamentally alike, not fundamentally different. A third, more ideological assumption, is observable through the choice of text-types for advanced spoken discourse, which are confined almost entirely to debates on social or political issues, with interviews playing a smaller role.[2] This appears to reflect a hierarchical notion of the intellectual or academic value of different kinds of content, where the spoken discourse which is selected for the advanced learner being that which

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[2] I omit here the frequent exercises in the oral description of pictures, a task prompted by its inclusion in the Goethe Institut *Zentrale Mittelstufenprüfung*. Such exercises are so obviously grammar and vocabulary tests or simply exercises with no link to authentic speech that they need not be discussed further here.

is closest to written text-types. Thus even in communicative courses, the traditional prestige value of the written text is maintained.


## 1.2.    Progression from school to university

The traditional distribution of the stages of language learning between school and university means that increasingly, the schools' role is perceived from the university perspective as falling at the earlier, speech-focused end of the sequence, while the universities' role is to work on written skills. In fact, this perception of what happens in schools is valid, at least in terms of British syllabuses, only for 11-16 year-olds. In the National Curriculum for England and Wales, for instance, the syllabus lists eleven points on "communicating in the target language" of which eight are exclusively or largely devoted to speaking, two to reading and one to writing, while of the fifteen "language skills" listed, again eight focus on speaking, four on reading and listening and three on writing.[3]   At school-leaving level, although Boaks reports that all four skills are at present weighted equally at A-level and Scottish Highers (1998: 37), the new syllabuses for 2001 rate speaking at a more modest third of the overall marks, and a fifth in Northern Ireland.

Writing at GCSE and A level is closely associated with reading and listening, and learners write some answers in English ("exercises requiring the transfer of meaning"). Student written production on starting third level shows signs of a concentration at school level on routines and formulas for writing, phrases such as *es liegt auf der Hand, es ist nicht zu leugnen*, and this shows the early stage of the writing curve, where again the target skill is approached through the memorisation of unanalysed chunks. Despite syllabus changes it is therefore probably still valid to argue that a university language syllabus "concentrates on the written language rather than the spoken language and thus makes up for the deficit in the production of extended written discourse which undergraduates inherit from their language programmes in school" (West 1992a: 32).

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[3]  Information on syllabuses in this section comes from the websites listed at the end of the paper. Neither the Scottish nor the Irish (Republic) sites consulted gave full information o n syllabus content in modern foreign languages.

At university, as at school, although the balance may be different, both written and spoken German are explicitly taught.  In a small informal survey carried out recently, the thirty-four higher education institutions which responded reported that they taught oral German to all students at all levels, although six respondents noted that their language courses were 'integrated', with speaking tied to writing, sometimes explicitly essay-writing.[4]  However, practice in dealing with the spoken language, as revealed by assessment procedures, shows that both at school leaving level and in the universities, authentic speech, 'real German', is losing out steadily to prepared or scripted speech.  In all of the school syllabuses investigated, oral exams involve extensive advanced preparation, even for role-plays, where dictionaries are often permitted, and presentations are made without scripts, but with the use of a 'cue-card'. In several syllabuses even the section of the oral devoted to 'general conversation' relies heavily on prepared topics which are known to, or selected by candidates in advance. The only exception is the Northern Irish syllabus, where conversation is unprepared – but also given a lower weighting in the marks.  At university level too, twenty-five of the thirty-four respondents described their oral exams as being based on prepared material, ranging from 'prescribed topics', through oral summaries of read or heard texts to 'presentations' and 'mini-Referate'.  Clearly assessment procedures are only part of the picture, and it must be assumed that most classroom discourse is unprepared, but it is reasonable to suppose, on the basis of the well-known 'backwash-effect' whereby what is examined influences what is taught, that in systems where only prepared discourse is tested, unprepared discourse will enjoy a less privileged position, and students will be less eager to learn it actively.

As will be shown in the next section, there is a marked difference in terms of authenticity between prepared and spontaneous speech, with the former sharing many characteristics with written language.  Just as students who can do short turns may be unable to do long turns, so students who can prepare a role-play or a presentation may be unable to cope with natural speech, which requires rapid adaptation to the unexpected.  It is not the purpose of this paper to argue against the teaching of written

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[4]  The survey was carried out using the e-mail list german-studies@mailbase.ac.uk, which is sponsored by the Conference of University Teachers of German in Great Britain and Ireland. 30 respondents were from UK institutions, of which 24 were 'old' and 6 'new' universities: 4 respondents were from institutions in the Republic of Ireland.

language, or even against the teaching of spoken language which resembles written language closely – merely to draw attention to the deficits in spoken language syllabuses which leave off things like spontaneous speech for learners over the age of 16, and to ask if this can be remedied.

## 2. 'Real German': authentic speech

Spoken German displays a high level of variability not only between speakers, depending on factors such as their country and region of origin, age, gender and level of education, but also within the speech of the individual, depending on context in the shape of, for instance, topic, role, relative status and degree of familiarity of the interlocutors. Nowadays in most circumstances German speakers use neither standard *Hochdeutsch* nor traditional dialects, but rather *regionale Umgangssprachen* which are used over large areas and at a range of levels of formality. This has scarcely been reflected in the kind of German taught to foreigners, where an attempt has been made to sustain the fiction of an "abstraktes Standarddeutsch" (Krumm 1997: 134), a variety which is close to the written norm and which has the virtue of being universally understood. This creates the impression for the learner that language attitudes in German-speaking countries mirror those found in Britain (or more specifically England), and that regional varieties are stigmatised. Durrell observes that – despite recent trends, regional identities are still strong and varieties prestigious in many cases, because the standard *Hochdeutsch* is "widely held to be distant and alien and inappropriate for informal use – its origin as the formal written language of an élite, without geographical roots, is significant here" (Durrell 1992: 21). This position of the written language as a formal variety learnt at school, combined with the relative prestige of regional varieties, means that the gap between spoken and written German is far wider than that between spoken and written English.[5] The topic of regional and social variation goes beyond the scope of the present paper, but it must be noted as a significant barrier to the teaching of authentic spoken German.

The written language : spoken language contrast is not a polar opposition, but a continuum along which different text-types fall according to a series of criteria, with,

for example, a legal text having more written characteristics than a personal letter, while an interview with a politician has fewer spoken characteristics than a conversation around the family breakfast table (Schwitalla 1997: 19). The linguistic analysis of spoken discourse – 'conversation' or 'talk' – generally confines itself to the description of language around the spoken pole of this opposition, which is defined as being unplanned and spontaneous, rather than speech based on speakers "reproducing expressions of opinion which they have thought a lot about, mentally 'rehearsed' or uttered on previous occasions" (Brown & Yule 1983: 4). Spoken language as it occurs in natural contexts is dialogic, not monologic: it is "essentially co-operative" (Wardhaugh 1985: 1) and has an "innere Gesellschaftlichkeit" (Schwitalla 1997: 11). This means that the participants have to manage their interaction and negotiate meaning:

a)   SIE: da geht man in ein schön heiratspalast/ [Pause] da: bezahlt man [Pause] na ich weiß nich wieviel geld dafür/ dann hat man bißchen bißchen musik/ un-dann hält irgend-n bezirksleiter noch-ne ansprache/ und dann werden pro tach viersich ehen geschlossen \ alles kühl und sachlich \

ER: ja das genücht ja auch\

SIE: ja / [Pause] mir nich\

ER: also mir genücht die formalitet daß es auf-m pepier steht/ schön/ also:\ [Pause] gehört mir nun endlich\ ja/ das genücht mir\

SIE: ja/ äh i eh [Pause] ja vielleicht/ aber ich meine

ER: ich brauch da nich noch großartich eine eine [Pause] eine bestetijung von vom pastor/und so\

SIE: nein paß mal auf\[6]

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[5] This remark applies to discourse structure, lexis, syntax and, to an extent morphology. It does not, of course, apply to pronunciation, where the gap in English is very wide indeed.

[6] The extract is from a transcription in Schwitalla (1997: 40-41): in the interests of simplicity, word-stress and commentaries on non-verbal activity have been removed. The symbols / and \ indicate rising and falling intonation respectively, and underlined text indicates simultaneous speech. Halliday argues that the use of transcripts like this is a "caricature" of real speech, because in his view they make conversation look less structured than it really is (1998: 100).

b) INTERVIEWER: Muß denn ein Lehrling, der zu Ihnen kommt, schon eine bestimmte Ausbildung haben, oder fängt der ganz von vorne an?

MÜLLER: Ja, es gibt welche, die wollen von vorne anfangen, sind aber mesitens dazu schon zu alt, weil sie bei uns komischerweise immer erst mit 27 so was ankommen. Da hat alles andere nicht geklappt offenbar. Und dann kommen sie ins Theater und meinen, sie müßten künsterlisch arbeiten, das wird dann sehr schwer. Weil solche Leute haben noch gar nichts praktisch gemacht meistens, ja.

(Authentik: A19, see West 1992b)

The texts are marked as spoken German through phonetic and morphological features (elision, loss of word-final sounds, regionally marked pronunciation indicated in text a), syntax (non-hierarchical paratactic constructions), and discourse features such as repetitions and pauses. The rhetorical organisation of the texts features typical turn-openers in informal discourse – *ja* (*gut*), *also* – which in longer extracts we could expect to be joined by *ja und* and *ja aber*: Narrative, exemplificatory parts of the text are linked with *und dann*, opinions marked by *ich meine* (also *ich finde*) (Schwitalla 1997: 54-55). The texts are coherent and cohesive, using pro-forms (*ein Lehrling - der*) and ellipsis of redundant information (*[sie] sind aber meistens*) to achieve this. In the opening turn of text a) the use of *da* creates a structure with recursive theme which is "especially characteristic of spoken language" (West 1992b: 51). The dynamic nature of the conversation is illustrated by the clarification and limitation which ER offers for the *das* in *das genücht ja auch*.

The differences between texts a) and b) and speech written especially for the language learner are very striking, as we see in the following example, a stimulus for discussion from *em Abschlusskurs*:

Ich fürchte, Ihr Standpunkt geht etwas an der Realität vorbei. Es ist doch so: Was in dem Zeitungsartikel berichtet wird, kann jederzeit auch bei uns passieren. Bei uns gibt es auch Tiere, die für den Menschen (bzw. seinen Lebensraum) gefährlich werden, und zwar ... (Perlmann-Balme et al. 1999: 13).

This extract demonstrates again that what is printed in coursebooks seems designed to give learners the message that spoken and written language are formally very close. However, in recognition that conventions for scripted dialogue are in fact "characteristically different from the conventions of structures in naturally occurring conversation" (Brown & Yule 1983: 33), most modern coursebooks use authentic audio material.

One further characteristic of talk which is important here, in that it is highly problematical from a pedagogical point of view, is that conversation is purposeful: "speakers have a social or personal reason to speak. There is an information gap to be filled, or an area of uncertainty to be made clear. What is said is potentially interesting or useful to the participants" (Pattison 1997: 7). And the converse is also true: "most naturally occurring conversations are extremely boring unless you happen to be an active engaged participant" (Brown & Yule 1983: 33). Personal matters of transitory significance form the topic of most talk, while socio-political issues like animal rights, medical ethics or compulsory speed limits are authentic topics only for individuals with a special interest in them. The material presented as speech in coursebooks is thus authentic only for a small group of speakers, which can only by chance include the learners who are given the task of talking about it. Conversation is thus authentic or inauthentic in the dimensions of both form and content. The role of form and content in language teaching is one which has of course been widely discussed in the literature, but its special significance in the teaching of talk needs to be noted here.

## 3. Why should university students of German study talk?

University students are motivated to learn German both for personal long-term reasons, and to fulfil shorter term goals which are set by the higher education institution. According to a large-scale survey of British students, the majority study German for their future career, because of a wish to travel and because they like the language (Coleman 1996: 193). In terms of specifically linguistic goals, a smaller and more recent study has shown that about three-quarters of the respondents hope to achieve 'fluency': despite this strong orientation towards speech, however, over a third of the respondents stated that they actually spoke German for less than an hour per

week (Elspaß 1999: 465 - 466). Reasons cited for not speaking more were large class sizes, small number of hours of tuition, and for a significant number, fear of grammatical error, with a quarter considering that their main difficulties in speaking German involved gender and adjective endings (Elspaß 1999: 462). This perception, probably a result of the focus of error remediation by teachers, should be inappropriate in its application to speech given that in natural conversation there are so many demands on the speaker that "he [sic.] is by no means free to concentrate on the grammatical content of his productions" (quoted in Aijmer 1996: 9).

The goals which the institution imposes on students are twofold: firstly, the requirement to succeed in examination and assessment, and secondly, the requirement to spend a period abroad, usually a compulsory year at most British and Irish institutions. The practice of using prepared material in oral examinations at schools and universities has already been noted in the first section. From section two, it will be apparent that prepared discourse falls closer to the written than to the spoken pole of the linguistic continuum, on a number of grounds. On the set of variables by which Schwitalla judges these relationships, any oral exam will tend towards the written end by virtue of being a relatively distanced and formal means of communication, where one participant is privileged over the other in determining the topic and probably in managing the discourse by deciding when to begin and end turns, and by requiring the other participant to take longer turns (1997: 18-19). If the conversation is also non-spontaneous, partly prepared and monologic, this places it towards the written pole by six out of nine formal criteria. By any standards this relativises the value of such exams as tests of spoken German. The issue of content is another problematical factor in such presentations, since in many cases it is not seriously tested, which means that "the speaker can[not] see a reasonable purpose for the task at hand": the levels of knowledge of examiner and examinee are also an issue, as "we do not normally tell people what they obviously know already" (Brown & Yule 1983: 111). The purposeless nature of the oral exam – which superficially resembles a *Referat*, but which is delivered to a single very well-informed listener – may be a factor in determining the student assumption that it is genders and adjective endings which will be judged most important.

From the institutional point of view, oral exams based on prepared material may be intended as a way of demonstrating that content is taken seriously, and hence by extension that the oral exam has a serious academic character, and is worthy of the proportion of marks which it commands. Again, this reflects the prestige value which is attached to written and written-like texts.

Students' goals during the year abroad are varied. Just over half of all students of German go to study at universities, and a fifth each to be English language teaching assistants and to other work placements (Coleman 1996). At least one important aim of going abroad is to improve linguistic skills, and Elspaß refers to students at the start of their final year as being "auf dem Höhepunkt ihrer fremdsprachlichen Kompetenz" (1999: 466). For this very reason – as well as, perhaps, a certain pressure from quality assessors to integrate time spent abroad into the study programme as a whole – a third of the institutions which responded to the informal questionnaire note that they already make arrangements to hold the oral exam closer to the year abroad than other examinations, and a further five respondents said that such a change was either contemplated, or was considered desirable but impossible for practical reasons. It is debatable, however, whether the year abroad prepares the students in any but the most general way for the kind of oral examinations which they encounter, given the absence of any authentic model for the text-types in which they are examined. The effects of the students' age may be particularly noted here, since the formal modes of discourse which are examined are rarely encountered amongst this group, being more appropriate to older speakers.

"Writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing the same things: rather they are ways of doing different things" (Halliday 1999: xv). The task to which talk is best suited is that of building relationships with other people, and the ambition of making friends while abroad is one which probably all students share. However, students who have not developed their interactional skills beyond what was learnt in the early years of their schooling, and who are accustomed to basing their spoken style on formal written German, will find it difficult to get to know their peers. Many former students of German have testified to the culture shock they experienced on first visiting a German-speaking country for a prolonged period and discovering the gap between native and learner German. If students are nervous to speak for fear of the

wrong adjective ending or because of the lack of vocabulary, they will not be able to keep pace with the demands of normal conversation, while concentrating on grammar rather than on being co-operative in terms of giving and seeking feedback, listening and adapting to the hearer and other features of dynamic talk will make them very inadequate conversational partners. Institutions frequently complain that students join English-speaking ghettos during the year abroad on the assumption that this is caused by a lack of self-confidence, rather than by inadequate linguistic preparation.

One of the aspects of talk which is most neglected at university level because it is only marginal to academic discourse is socio-cultural and pragmatic competence, the knowledge of communicative norms which makes it possible for people to function in a society without being considered offensive, rude or odd. Saville-Troike observes that "the discovery of communicative norms is most obvious in their breach" (1989: 137), and this can be serious. Pragmatic failure, when a learner does not know the appropriate routine for a particular context, such as receiving a compliment or expressing gratitude, may cause a situation where learners "deprive themselves of the opportunities to establish relationships with native speakers and, thereby, of the input that they need to develop both their linguistic and sociolinguistic competence" (Ellis 1994: 165). Lack of interactional competence is thus a vicious circle: students whose German is not adequate to make friends speak English, and so they fail to improve their German.

As I have written elsewhere, the level of culture clash which occurs between German and English native speakers is often underestimated, mainly because of different norms of politeness (Watts 1994). That article examined a number of situations, such as those where punctuality, borrowing money and apologising are concerned, where English speakers perceive normal German behaviour is unacceptably direct and rude, while German speakers may find their English-speaking counterparts rude, dishonest and hypocritical respectively. A more substantial study by House and Kasper shows that in key areas such as making complaints, German learners of English make pragmatic errors involving too much directness and too few modality markers, and that these too cause English native speakers to regard them as impolite (1981: 158). House and Kasper conclude from the negative effects that this perception has on the success of the language learning experience that "the interpretation and use of politeness"

ought to be explicitly taught in language courses, in order to prevent "impolite, ineffective or otherwise inappropriate behavior on the part of the learner" (1981: 184). Politeness can be taught in the context of written language as well, of course, especially in the context of letter-writing, but it is particularly important in conversation because of the short time span available to the speaker for choosing an appropriate utterance.

Only a learner who can behave appropriately in different situations without either causing or being affected by culture clash, can be considered to have acquired true intercultural competence. Concern is sometimes expressed that such a requirement amounts to a demand for "cultural assimilation" and for the "systematic imitation of all things native", thus abandoning the perspective of 'otherness' which is a natural part of intercultural contact (Jones 1998: 8). It is not contended that students should lose their anchor in their own culture during their time abroad. It is necessary, however, for them to adapt to another attitudinal framework, in which they may develop a more differentiated concept of the nature of politeness, for example, as a failure to do so will result in a failure to build relationships across the cultural divide.


## 4. Feasibility. The future of talk in German at university

It emerges from the preceding sections that student need to improve their interactional skills if they are to benefit fully from their year abroad, and that they need institutional support, ideally in the form of both tuition and testing, if they are to achieve this goal. It has been established that students have a rather low level of exposure to the form of authentic spoken discourse, since they hear it in contexts where their attention is on its message, and rarely have the opportunity to see it transcribed. One difficulty in exposing students to this kind of material is that many teachers are reluctant to allow students to look at forms in writing which are 'wrong', and there may be a particular unwillingness to do this in German, given the extent to which the spoken language diverges from written norms, and the strong association of those written norms with the educational process. This suggests that it may be culturally difficult actually to teach students to produce German like that found in texts a) and b) above.

Pedagogically, too, the teaching and examining of interactional speech present problems, because of the difficulty of finding interlocutors who can engage in purposeful authentic talk. Brown & Yule point out that it is "hard to sustain institutionalised 'chat' for timetabled periods of time" (1983: 32), and this was our experience in Dublin when we attempted to enliven conversation classes by replacing them with 'clubs' founded on student interests - music, sport, politics, film, food and so on. Although some enthusiastic students profited enormously from expanding their vocabularies on topics which were of genuine interest to them, the majority lacked the motivation to attend a programme which was not seen as wholly serious. Once again, the low prestige of conversation militated against it.

However, these difficulties need not prevent students being taught about this kind of text through linguistic study, which might in this case be seen as a kind of 'para-language learning'. Students can successfully be shown how conversations work by analysing transcripts of talk in both English and German, since some of the phenomena are universal, and this can fruitfully lead to discussions of many politeness norms as well as of discourse strategies. The topics which students bring up in this kind of tuition in my experience cover important areas of intercultural difference like the handshake, the use of combinations of *Sie - du*, titles, first names and surnames, the relative frequency of direct questions and imperatives in different types of discourse and languages, and many others. Such a course can also provide a reason to look at some of the functional grammars which exist to support this kind of learning, and which describe conversational routines in some detail, such as Weinrich (1993) and Dodd et al (1996), thus expanding the range of reference works which students have the skills to use. Finally, in teaching students "about the different cultural environment in which [German] is spoken", we would be fulfilling what Durrell suggests should be "one of the prime aims of the study of a foreign language at university level" (1992: 23).

The proposal, then, is to teach interaction in a course which would represent a meeting-point between the 'content' and the 'language' elements of a programme of study. This course would be placed prior to the period spent abroad so that students could profit to the largest possible extent from the skills it gave them to make friends and integrate into German culture. The interactional skills acquired in this way could

then be tested on the student's return in an informal oral exam, the content of which would be the cultural differences which students had noted during their year abroad, and which would have the form of a 'debriefing' on the year abroad. Indeed, some institutions use a form of this procedure already, and make the exercise more purposeful by videoing the sessions so that they also provide informative material for subsequent students.

The introduction of a course such as this would leave institutions free to base the final oral exam on a more monologic style in order to give full rein to the need for intellectual content. In ideal circumstances this test would be designed so that some kind of information gap was involved, thus lessening the communicative stress on the candidate by making the event relevant and purposeful. Probably the simplest way of doing this is to have the student talk about their dissertation, a topic on which their knowledge is likely to be more expert than that of the examiner. There are, however, other ways of injecting a degree of authenticity into the situation, for example by allowing the student to give the examiner a list of questions to which the latter may expect to learn the answers during the presentation. An almost completely authentic situation could be created by asking the examiner to issue a list of current films which s/he has not yet seen, so that the student could present a review, and then discuss the likelihood that the examiner would enjoy the film on the basis of revealed tastes and interests.

## 5. Conclusion

The question of the nature of the linguistic skills which students will require for European citizenship remains an open one. I believe that students are most likely to fulfil their own goals of travelling widely and enjoyably if they have the intercultural skills which will enable them to make personal contacts with German speakers. It is likely that the business world of the future will use English to an increasing extent, as is already the case in a number of large German companies, and this will mean that students' ability to interact socially in their leisure time will be far more important than their vocational, workplace-related skills. Another development which is already occurring is the resurgence of orality in hi-tech communication: e-mails often have a

'stream of consciousness' form which brings them far closer to the spoken than to the written word, and this intermediate form is becoming a primary means of communication in many settings. If the age of privileged written communication is on the decline, then at least one of the roles of the university language course must be to prepare our students for the oral comeback.

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Sheila Watts hat am Trinity College Dublin studiert, promoviert und 1990-1998 Deutsch und germanistische Linguistik gelehrt. Seit 1998 arbeitet sie am Department of German, University of Cambridge. Ihre Forschungsschwerpunkte liegen hauptsächlich in der Geschichte der deutschen Sprache. 2001 erschien bei Niemeyer der von Watts, Jonathan West und Hans-Joachim Solms herausgegebene

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