

German for Verbally Gifted Youngsters at Hopkins: the First Year

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During the academic year 1978-79 the Department of German of the Johns Hopkins University offered a course in Beginning German as part of the Hopkins Program for Verbally Gifted Youth (PVGY). PVGY was initiated at Hopkins in the fall of 1978 by the Writing Seminars and the Departments of German and Classics. An announcement of the German course appeared in the fall 1979 issue of *Unterrichtspraxis*. After a year's experience we are now able to report in greater detail on our program.

The principal objective of our program is to offer verbally gifted eighth graders a college-level course in writing. The principal offering is therefore Expository Writing. The two additional courses, Greek and Latin in Current English Use and Beginning German, were thought of initially as supplements to the writing course. To permit the students to elect writing and one of the offerings of the Departments of Classics and German, we scheduled the writing class on Saturday mornings from ten to twelve and the other two classes from one to three on Saturday afternoons. The classes met for a total of twenty-seven weeks.

The students to whom we sent announcements of our program had been identified as having high verbal aptitude by the talent search conducted by Julian C. Stanley, the Director of the Johns Hopkins Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY).¹ The criteria for selection were a score of 430 or better on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and thirty-five or better on the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). The fifty-three students who enrolled in our various classes ranged in age from twelve to fourteen and came from Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Contrary to our expectations, not all of the students elected two courses. Of the eleven who signed up for German only two also enrolled in the writing course. The main reason for their choice of German proved to be that it was not offered by their schools. We were therefore able to begin our course with the gratifying sense of offering an educational experience which our students could not have had otherwise.

In planning the German course we had agreed that it should be a fast-paced college-level course. To insure this, we chose as text one which

had been adopted for the Hopkins course in elementary German, *First-Year German* by Helbing, Gewehr, and von Schmidt (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975). The instructor, one of the authors of this paper, was able to compare the youngsters' progress with that of college-level students because of his experience in teaching both at the college level, while working toward the doctorate in German at Hopkins, and at the secondary level at St. Paul's School for Boys, where he is presently teaching. From time to time, the youngsters were given tests that had been prepared for the college classes, and these also helped us check their progress. They did consistently well on all of these tests.

Like mathematically precocious youngsters, those with high verbal ability also tend to feel bored or frustrated by what Julian Stanley refers to as the "routine school system," in which misinformed administrators and teachers sometimes put obstacles in the way of gifted children rather than helping them develop their special abilities, and in which the youngsters' peers often make them uncomfortable by calling them names such as "brain freaks." A most gratifying experience on the first day of instruction was the obvious delight of our young people at finding themselves in a peer-group in which they had no reason to feel strange because they were unusually able. We quickly perceived, however, that even as gifted youngsters they did not constitute a homogeneous group. They manifested different degrees of ability in imitating German sounds, in grasping points of grammar, and in retaining learned material. Some also had a better background in English than others.

Because all of our youngsters were highly motivated, and also because they felt comfortable with one another in spite of their different levels of ability, we were able to spark a competitive spirit in class without affecting morale. One effective teaching device was the use of team-type learning situations. Especially popular was a game called "Family Feud" modeled on the television program with the same title. For this game the class was arbitrarily divided into two teams, "A" and "B." The instructor would then address a question on vocabulary to a member of team "A," or perhaps ask the student for a synonym or antonym, allowing ten seconds for the response. During these ten seconds team "B," working as a group, attempted to discover the correct answer. If the member of team "A" succeeded in giving the correct answer within the allotted time, team "A" was awarded two points. If he failed, team "B" had the chance to attempt to answer the question for one point. The game would then proceed with the instructor asking a question of a member of team "B." The score was carried over from week to week, and the game thus provided a continuing source of suspense. The team with the highest point-total eventually won the "feud," which was at all times a most friendly one.

New materials were presented at the beginning of the hour each Saturday. After this formal part of the class the atmosphere became that of a workshop. The students were permitted to work together on

their assignment, if they wished, while the instructor circulated among them, answering questions as they arose. An advantage of allowing the students to work together on their assignments was that they developed into mentors for one another in the course of the year. While counseling their classmates they also perfected their own knowledge of German.

A group activity which the class as a whole very much enjoyed was writing to pen-pals in Germany. Like so many other ideas, this one also came from a member of the group. Through the letters the youngsters formed friendships and also learned about life in Germany as experienced by individuals of their own age.

Although our students elected German primarily because they wished to learn to read, understand, speak, and write German, they also set themselves the practical goals of preparing for the College Board Achievement Test and the Advanced Placement Test. Because we met them only once a week they had to work on their own. Thanks to their ability to grasp new materials quickly and to retain what they had learned, and also thanks to their skill in dealing with complexities, they were able, in spite of our brief contact with them, to complete the grammar in two-thirds the time required by the students in the first-year college course. One reason for their success was that we impressed upon them early in the year the necessity of spending adequate time on home-study. Several of the students who had never before been challenged to work to capacity found the assignments demanding at first. Because gifted children like to work at the level of competence of which they are capable, however, they soon came to enjoy the challenge. We discovered, however, that even gifted children sometimes overestimate their ability to master new material quickly. Summarizing main points proved to be as essential for gifted youngsters as for the not so gifted. Periodic review was also a necessity.

Verbally gifted youngsters at the eighth grade level are best, we found, at college-level work involving more mechanical operations, such as learning linguistic patterns and paradigms. At this point in their development, however, they still seem limited in their ability to deal with abstractions. When we read and discussed Goethe's "Erlkönig" late in the second semester they were able to grasp easily the more mechanical aspects of literary analysis. When we compared Goethe's ballad with "Edward," they quickly perceived the basic differences between a popular and a literary ballad. They were also able to appreciate the subtle mixture of epic, lyric, and dramatic qualities in Goethe's poem. From their response to the "Erlkönig" and other works of German literature we concluded that verbally gifted youngsters might well be able to acquire at the eighth grade level, or perhaps even earlier, some of the more practical skills necessary for literary analysis, and hence be spared the necessity of acquiring these at a later time in their development when they might devote themselves more appropriately to the more complex problems posed by literary texts.

On the very first day of class we made clear to our students that we

could not guarantee that their schools would allow credit for the German they would learn at Hopkins. We promised, however, to send them written evaluations of their work at the end of the academic year which they could present to their principal or headmaster. To measure their progress, we gave them, in addition to the quizzes prepared for the students in the college first-year course, the College Placement Test (CPT) in German reading. On the CPT, which we administered at the end of the second semester, their scores, computed to express equivalent College Board scores, were quite respectable. Of the eight students who took the test five received scores of 430 or better (430, 470, 500, 530, 540). The other three scored 280, 370, and 390. By this time three of the original eleven students had dropped the course. One had to give up because of the lack of background in English grammar; one decided that it was more important to participate in the activities of the school's outing club, and the third, who had initially elected both writing and German, and who had moreover skipped two grades in school, finally dropped both writing and German because the total work-load resultant from so many new courses was overwhelming.

We assigned final grades on the basis of the students' quiz averages and their CPT scores. In consideration of the special situation of eighth graders taking work of college-level difficulty, we decided to give letter grades only to those whose work had been good or excellent. By giving three letter grades, "A," "B," and "P," we were able to discriminate without unduly penalizing those whose performance would in all likelihood have been considered satisfactory or even very good in a normal eighth grade class in beginning German.

At a meeting after the last class of the second semester, the students agreed that in learning German they had discovered many important things about their own native language. One student, for example, mentioned that the explanations in German class of the function of English gerunds and gerundives had helped her understand her English teacher's explanation of these forms several weeks later in English class.² The greatest overall satisfaction expressed was the students' sense of having begun to acquire the ability to communicate in a language other than their own. From the small sample of German literary works which we were able to include they had also perceived that the language would ultimately offer access to worthwhile cultural experiences; and those who are presently taking second year German are enjoying the literary works which we chose to prepare them for the Advanced Placement Test.

From our experience in teaching German to verbally gifted youngsters we have learned many things about teaching methods and materials, and have gained valuable insights into the problems of working with verbally gifted children. What we have learned should enable us to work more effectively with similar groups in the future. We also hope, however, that the methods developed to train verbally gifted youngsters, and also the techniques which they themselves have suggested for effectively teaching a foreign language will ultimately

prove beneficial for *other* young language learners.

The best texts, in light of our experience, would seem to be readings which are imaginative, but not too abstract. Our students responded particularly well to original versions of some of the Grimms' fairy-tales, which, in spite of their seeming simplicity, exemplify many of the literary values of which one wishes to make students aware. The optimum format of a class for verbally gifted youngsters would seem to be an informal kind of workshop situation, for verbally gifted young people, we found, need to express themselves and can best do so in an atmosphere which confronts them with a minimum of restraints. One aspect of the workshop-type class which we consider of potential value for all junior high school beginning foreign language classes is the mentor-type experience in which one student helps another, and in so doing perfects his own skill.

Both the first and second year PVGY German classes are progressing very well. One of our satisfactions has been the sense of accomplishing at least a few of the objectives proposed for the profession by the MLA/ACLS Task Forces. Chief among these is that of offering youngsters the chance to study a foreign language at an optimal age. It is also satisfying to realize that in offering a college-level course to eighth graders we are encouraging closer cooperation between secondary schools and colleges and universities. Our program has been successful because it is a cooperative effort. Its success has convinced us that, by pooling resources, schools and colleges can perform more effectively than either of them can independently, the vitally important task of developing the human talent which the nation now needs perhaps more urgently than at any other time in history.

Notes

¹Dr. Stanley and his staff were willing to consult with us during all of the planning phases of our program, and their advice was of inestimable value. A comprehensive survey of the most significant work on giftedness and talent by Stanley and others is *The Gifted and the Creative. A Fifty-Year Perspective*, ed. Julian C. Stanley, William C. George, and Cecelia H. Solano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

²The instructors in the writing classes and the class in Greek and Latin backgrounds of English were also struck by the generally poor preparation the students in the program had received in English in their respective schools. The students tried hard to overcome their deficiencies as soon as they became aware of them.