

German for Everyone – An Intensive Language Course Weekend in the Tokai Region

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Abstract

An intensive German language course weekend, open to both university students and older learners, was held in Kariya (near Nagoya) for 2 ½ days in 2003 and 2004. This course aimed mainly at advanced learners, for whom there are very few opportunities to learn German in the Tokai region. Older learners (*shakai-jin*) were very interested in an intensive course, and five classes of 10 participants each were held with students aged between 19 and 75. The article describes the reasons for holding such a course, looks at the background of the participants, and discusses the problems and results of this an event.

概要

2003年と2004年にドイツ語の週末強化コースが、刈谷市(名古屋近郊)で、2日半に渡りされた。これは、大学生との熟年学習者(社会人)に開かれたものである。このコースは主に上級学習者向けであり、東海地区ではドイツ語を習得できる機会が少ない彼らの為に行なわれた。熟年の学習者はとても関心を持たれて、クラスはそれぞれ19歳から75歳までの10名程となった。この記事は、強化コースを行った理由、参加者の学歴、コースの問題点と結果を説明するものである。

1. The need for an intensive German language course

The Tokai region with Nagoya as its center has about 10 million inhabitants and is home to many academic institutions. However, compared to Tokyo or Kyoto/Osaka, there are very few advanced courses for German, even taking into account the larger population or the higher number of universities in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. Most of the German language courses in the Tokai region are held for undergraduate students at universities, and many of these only cover the basic levels.

German language courses that are open to the general public, are offered by a number of culture centers and language schools as well as university-affiliated open colleges in the Tokai region. However, there is no coordination between these institutions, and advanced level courses often do not take place due to a lack of participants. In Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto there are Goethe-Institutes, which offer many courses for different purposes and a wide variety of levels, but in Nagoya there is no such institute (Alliance Française and The British Council do have branch offices in Nagoya, though).

Initially, it was difficult to quantify the demand for courses for advanced levels and/or for the general public, but several German teachers around Nagoya had the impression that there would be a sufficient number of participants for an intensive language course. This demand came mainly from *shakai-jin*, but also from university students. *Shakai-jin* is a particularly Japanese expression, combining all adults above the average student age, regardless of their profession. A *shakai-jin* can be a housewife, a salaried worker as well as retirees, or unemployed. *Shakai-jin* learning German in Nagoya have studied German at university, like German culture or have travelled to or even lived in German speaking countries. They now continue studying German, mainly in the above mentioned culture centers and open colleges, but also through private language courses. Many of them have reached a very high competence in reading, but often also in speaking and listening. A small group with a strong demand for language courses are graduates, who left university a few years ago. They want to continue learning German, so that they will not lose their knowledge, as in most cases they cannot use German in their daily life.

There is also a demand from university students for more intensive German language courses; however there are few students who are interested in doing more than the university classes. Most university students studying German do so only in compulsory education classes in the first and second years, and even of those continuing German for two more years, not all are interested in additional studies.

Intensive German language courses outside the university curriculum are not new in Japan. The oldest of these institutions is the ‘Interuni-Seminar’, which has been held every year since 1978, mainly for students from universities in the Kanto region (Yoshijima 1982, 2001; Sakai 2002). It lasts for five days, during which students and teachers live together in a seminar house of a university. Similar courses have also been held in the Kansai region since 1986 (‘Studenten-Seminar’ of the Goethe-Institute Kyoto, now ‘Interuni Westjapan/Kyushu’; Yamahara 2001) and in Hokkaido in 1997 (Hänel 1998).

The idea to hold a similar intensive language course in the Tokai region was developed in 2002 and early 2003 by several teachers, who took part in the above mentioned Interuni courses in Kanto and Kyushu, and who had also heard about the demand from their university or shakai-jin students.

2. The structure of the intensive language course

Taking the Interuni courses as examples, it was decided that a course in the Tokai region should follow the same pattern, that is staying for several days in a seminar house, with students and teachers living together to have the maximum amount of German language contact, classes with about 10 participants, and activities outside the classroom.

Because many shakai-jin were planning to take part in the course and many of them could not take leave, it was not possible for the course to be five days long. A long weekend (Saturday and Sunday with a Monday as public holiday) was the only possibility, and so far the course has been held twice, from 1st to 3rd November 2003, and from 9th to 11th October 2004. Given the time limits of a three-day-course, a location close to Nagoya had to be found, so that the course could start in the morning of the first day.

The search for a university seminar house or a similar lodging facility with beds for at least 50 people and five classrooms within a distance of 50 km from central Nagoya was unsuccessful. The solution was to hold the classes at Aichi University of Education and to stay overnight and do the evening activities at the nearby prefectural Kariya Labour Welfare Hall (‘Aiplaza’).

The general pattern of the course was as follows:

	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
morning	information/introduction lesson (2 hours)	lesson (3 hours)	lesson (2 hours) final presentation
noon	lunch at canteen	<i>Brotzeit</i>	
afternoon	lesson (3 hours)	lesson (3 hours)	
evening	activities	activities	

With about 50 participants, five classes of different levels with 10 students each were formed. Five lessons with a duration of three hours each were scheduled, although due to the introduction and the final presentation, the first and last classes were shorter. Lunch on the first day was taken at the university’s canteen; on the second day it was closed, so a ‘Brotzeit’ with German bread, ham and sausage was offered. Dinner and breakfast were eaten at the Aiplaza, where the evening activities also took part. These activities offered the participants a wide variety of use of the German language, by watching German movies, taking part in discussions, playing games, singing German songs and more.

The course could not be offered for free, as classrooms at the university, the Aiplaza and the meals had to be paid. To simplify registration, in 2003 every participant had to pay the same fee of ¥15,000, which included the lessons, six meals and two overnight stays. As several people preferred to drive home after the lessons, in 2004 the fee structure was changed to accommodate the different needs, and a reduction for students was offered as well as a discount for early booking. The fees in 2004 therefore ranged between ¥10,000 and ¥23,000 (see <http://www.tokaideutsch.de> for details).

3. Participants and their backgrounds

About 50 participants took part in each course. While in 2003 the ratio of university students to shakai-jin was equal, in 2004 there were about twice as many shakai-jin as students. This was probably due to the timing of the course in 2004, which was held just at the beginning of the winter semester, so that there was not enough time to encourage students to take part.

Undergraduate and graduate students from a number of universities in the Tokai region took part. Such undergraduate students are at least in their second year of study, so that everyone has a basic knowledge of German before the intensive course starts. Most of the students are German majors, and have been to German speaking countries or plan to do so in the future. Their motivation to take part is to improve their language abilities before going abroad, or to take the opportunity to speak German for three days to keep up their level. All these students are highly motivated, and none comes simply to learn enough German to pass the compulsory classes at university.

The shakai-jin learning German in the course were aged between 24 and 75 and had various language learning backgrounds. Most of them were learning German at a culture center or open college, at which classes are normally held once a week in the evening or at the weekend.

Of the young people under 30, many were recent graduates from German major courses at university and they took part in the course as a way to keep up their knowledge, as most of them do not have a chance to use German in their job or in their daily lives. Other young learners started learning German after the Soccer World Cup in 2002, when they became interested in German language and culture with the aim of travelling to Germany during the World Cup 2006. They are generally good at speaking German, and they know that fluent communication is an important tool once they travel to Germany.

Many of the older shakai-jin have German culture as their hobby, mostly combined with enthusiasm for classical music, but also reading about Germany and travelling to Europe. They have kept this hobby for up to 50 years, and have an enormous knowledge about German culture and society. Having Germany as one's hobby for many decades does not mean that everyone has a high level of language skills. While working, many people did not have the time for language studies, so they could only take part in language courses after retirement. Some had learned German many years before and had a basic knowledge of grammar, while others started from the beginning when 60 or 65 years old. Most of these older learners have a common preference for a systematic, grammar-centered teaching approach and may not be comfortable with the communicative teaching method (this seems to be common among older learners worldwide, see Berndt 2003, 198).

Very different to these learners are people who have lived in German-speaking countries for a longer time. They are often very fluent in speaking German and have a high level of listening competence, but do often not worry much about grammar. During their stay abroad they have learned that while communicating with other people it is important to respond fast, and that there is not always time to form a perfect sentence.

4. Classes and teachers

With about 50 participants taking part in the intensive course, five classes with 10 students each were formed. The five classes had different levels, from basic knowledge (participants knew basic grammar and could form simple sentences) to advanced level, where the students were able to

communicate very well and understand difficult texts. During the three days of the course, five lessons were held, each with a different teacher. Every teacher was responsible for lesson content, and to avoid one subject being taught twice in one class, every teacher's lesson plans were sent to the other teachers one week before the course. Additionally there was a file for each class, containing a copy of the teaching material for each lesson. According to demands from the participants, and as is common practice with intensive courses (Pleines 2003), most classes were taught using the communicative approach. This was eased by the small number of students in each class. The participants reacted positively and took part actively.

In 2003 as well as in 2004, eleven teachers gave lessons. As the intensive course was an initiative started by native speakers, in 2003 there were seven Germans and one Swiss among the teachers, while there were only three Japanese teachers. The following year, the ratio was more even, with six Germans and five Japanese taking part. Classes at every level were taught by both native and Japanese teachers, the only exception being the highest level, with only native speakers. Every teacher gave two lessons, however due to the relatively low number of teachers three of them had to give three lessons. Time without classes was usually used to attend other classes as an observer, to learn about other teaching methods and to be able to discuss them with others.

5. Problems

The biggest problem was to divide the participants into groups before the intensive course started. Although the teachers knew most of the students from their classes, some kind of test was thought to be necessary. In the above mentioned Interuni courses which have only university students as participants, this is quite easy, as most of them – although at different universities – took classes with similar content and progression, so that simply grouping all students with a similar number of classroom hours together into one class worked very well. However, in the Tokai intensive course with a very wide variety of learner histories, this system would not have worked.

In 2003, the participants were sent a multiple choice test developed by the German publisher Cornelsen, which they had to return at least one week before the course started. However, the results turned out to be of little use, as too many students performed very well with more than 90% of all questions correct. This was due to the fact that this test was centered on grammar, which especially suited the older learners, while speaking and listening activities were not tested, although they were of more importance for the intensive course. Using the results of this test, the participants were roughly grouped before the beginning of the course, and then interviews were used just before the course started to finalize the group divisions. However, several students asked to change their group on the first day of the course, and teachers recommended changes too.

In 2004, there was no written test, and all participants were interviewed in small groups on the first morning of the course, which took more than one hour. Although all interviews followed the same pattern (all interviewers had written guidelines), the division into groups was often subjective, and adjustments had to be made during the first two days of the course, too. Because no written test was conducted, participants with a low level of listening and speaking competence tended to be graded too low, which was often the case with older learners. In future, a combination of a written and spoken tests should be done, although it is very difficult to group the participants exactly into the correct levels.

With the participants having a wide variety of learning backgrounds, the teachers were prepared to encounter various problems during classes. However, it turned out that – except for the lowest level – all students had a very similar knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and the students were willing to help each other during class, each making use of his/her abilities. For example, students with a high speaking competence would help others in various stages of cooperative learning, or students would check their neighbours' written texts. The only problem that occurred in several classes was that some of the older learners (mostly men) dominated discussions. This did discourage others, especially younger university students, and it was the teacher's responsibility to

deal with these situations. One positive factor that could have contributed to this is, that many of the shakai-jin had known each other for many years from evening courses or events at the Japanese-German Society in Nagoya or similar activities, and felt comfortable speaking German.

6. Results

More than half of the participants in the 2003 course also took part in 2004. This is a sign, that the course was seen as successful by the students. Most of these repeaters were shakai-jin, so that the activities of the organizers will in future lay greater stress on encouraging more young university students to take part. In general, the combined classes of older and younger learners were positive, with each group supporting each other; especially the university students could learn a lot from the experienced shakai-jin.

With a German atmosphere pervading for three days, all participants were encouraged to use the language as often as possible. Including time at the meals, when the teachers were eating together with the students, and the evening programs, the total German contact time was 24 hours within three days, the equivalent of 16 standard language classes of 90 minutes. Teachers who taught the participants in their regular classes after the intensive course, noticed greater fluency and a higher confidence in spoken German, although no empirical studies have so far been conducted to prove this for this course.

7. References

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