

IMMERSION EXPERIENCES

Gillian Barron goes on a late OE

Second Handys* (or advanced vocabulary acquisition!)

Has language learning changed all that much? Are new methods any better than tried and tested ones? Do we need grammar? Konjunktiv 2 with modals? These are the questions I have been asking myself since arriving in Germany on a Goethe Institut Scholarship in March this year after taking the plunge to do an 'old' OE.

I write this in a landlineless, Internet connectionless (haven't yet had the courage to go knocking on neighbours' doors asking if they have W-Lan (wireless) and could I have their password!), 2-Zimmer Wohnung in Neuhausen, Munich, not far from the Nymphenburg Schloss.

When you achieve a certain level of a language and you can do most things, ie read the papers and hold a good conversation, you know that your language skills and vocabulary will never expand unless you are stretched to the limits with academic, literary and journalistic language (well – here I mean the contents of the Süddeutsche Zeitung and not Bild!) you will remain at the level of everyday basic language.



Gillian Barron (fifth from left)
with the Goethe Institut class in Munich

I have been granted 12 months leave from my job at the NZ

Ministry of Education to come to Europe to undertake some personal PD and do some teaching.

I have just completed the C2 preparation course for the Kleines Deutsche Sprachdiplom, kindly made possible through a Goethe Institute scholarship and it makes the bi-annual Intensivkurs in Wellington seem a happy Spaziergang im Park! As an experienced teacher of ESOL as well as German I know that research says that you need to live in a country for 7-9 years to be near native speaker level and my month's intensive course confirmed that.

Having been at a good C1 level (see Council of Europe language levels) before my arrival I had naively thought that the KDS would be the next logical step and I could 'knock the bastard off' in a month. How wrong I was!

I was sent a reading list as soon as I was accepted for the scholarship: only two books – Der Julitag by Hans Werner Richter and the famous Der Schimmelreiter by Theodor Storm. Just two books you may say, but I took fright. Firstly, I had not read serious German literature since university 100 years ago and secondly I had little time to find or purchase, let alone read the books before leaving New Zealand – we were moving out of our house, packing up for a year and working fulltime. I was able to borrow one book from the Goethe Institute and had to wait to get to Germany before purchasing the book by T. Storm. Do you remember the Reclam

books? So user-unfriendly in this world of colour! At least it wasn't printed in old script as were the books we waded through at Uni! Suffice it to say, that I had not read the books before the course began and instead of a pleasurable read they became a burden... of my own making! As I read the short, but significant Novelle, I was reminded of Paul Nation's words: if you do not understand 90% of the vocabulary on the page then you are not ready for that level. I was comforted by the fact that most words that I did not understand were glossed for German readers too!

The Goethe Institut organizes cultural activities and the odd museum visit once or twice a week plus a weekend excursion. In the class there were only nine students from Brazil, Ukraine, France, India and Taiwan and we got on very well. The advanced levels in Munich have classes in the afternoons and as a morning person I found I needed a strong coffee in the second kleine Pause (at 16.30) to keep me concentrating!

The Goethe Institut in Munich has a well stocked interactive library – Mediathek – and there is plenty of scope for self access study. Because of our daily prescribed Hausaufgaben it was not until towards the end of our course that I discovered all the exciting self access materials on hand, both paper and computer-based.

In our class we had no time for such niceties – we were too busy with essay writing on our Lektüre or the interminable grammar exercises – Umformungen – changing sentences round to mean the same thing – often to make use of the modals etc. Is there research that says that this is a worthwhile exercise?

Although I made great strides with the course and achieved at a C2 level, I decided not to sit the KDS examination. I felt I was not yet ready and will attempt it in November or the other internationally recognised Goethe Institut examination which I feel is more valuable – the ZOP (Zentrale Oberstufenprüfung), which is the highest level but without the Lektüre.

And for the books. Yes, I did finish them. Der Julitag was most interesting and I felt a sense of achievement that I was still able to read and discuss serious literature in German. With the Storm it was more difficult and I struggled with the vocabulary – old words that are glossed even for the German readers take the pleasure out of reading. I wonder at the value of that in a modern examination which is not primarily set for those wanting to enter the academic world of German literature.



Final dinner

The KDS course has been, however, very useful and challenging and took me out of my language comfort zone. I was able to feel satisfied with my performance in a one and a half hour job interview which I attended half way through the course, after which I was offered the job. I'm a pragmatist and that to me is as good as an examination certificate. I feel well prepared linguistically for an upcoming presentation at a Pädagogische Hochschule I shall be giving about the work we do in NZ

to support English language learners and a talk to parents of prospective International students about to start studying in New Zealand.

This course has been particularly beneficial to me as a second language specialist. Those of us who are in the business of teaching English language learners in schools need to have a wake up call now and again. Learning and maintaining a foreign language enough to be able to work and conduct business in that language is part of our globalization. Taking a year off from the beach, the familiarity of the Kiwi way of life and having no regular income: I'm only at the beginning of that challenge.

The biggest frustration: people hearing you speak and saying how good your German is when you haven't even used one form of Konjunktiv 2!

The most amusing collocation: The Title, which is a chain of shops selling used mobile phones!

Enjoying the culture is, of course, a must so I'm just off on my bike with my Handy to the beer garden. Prost.

[Editor: ein Handy is the German word for mobile phone]

[Click here for next article](#)