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Case Study

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## An Overview of a Native German Woman's English Language Learning Experience

### **Introduction**

Many native English speakers have grown up speaking only English. Often in middle school or high school, people will pick up beginning classes in Spanish, French, or German, only to stop the language learning once the high school classes stop. However, across the world, children as young as two and three begin English classes and study well into adulthood. Countries that are structured like this contribute to the nearly 1.5 billion English language learners in the world. While Chinese is the language spoken natively by the most people, English is the most popular based on native and non-native speakers (Furlow). In a recent interview with one of these non-native speakers, Jana Schierwater, her experience as an English Language Learner is detailed through her growth as a learner from child to adult, her likes and dislikes, and her preferred methods of study.

### **Language Learning Experience**

Jana Schierwater, age 28, was born and raised and currently lives in Germany. She, like many young children in Germany, began English language classes when she was 9 years old. These classes through her grade school were her only method of learning English. She and the other students spent 45 minutes in class twice a week.

Their main method of learning was straight dialogues. They were taught conversational structure and vocabulary through cassettes and CD players. She would then model these dialogues with her classmates. Their instructor would also use songs as a major resource for learning. Schiewater stated that she still remembers these songs today.

One of the major points of contrast between Language Learning of any kind in the United States and English Language Learning in Germany is that these children at 8 years old in Germany, are learning conversational tactics and speaking as much as possible in their course (Schierwater). In comparison to students in the United States, most students do not start learning a language until they are closer to 13 or 14, and won't be speaking well conversationally until much later. In fact, the United States is one of the few countries in the world that have no foreign language learning requirement. Depending on a student's school system, they may have to complete 2-3 years of a foreign language for graduation, but this is hardly the case for the country as a whole (Devlin).

Schierwater and her peers also completed tests at the halfway point and end point of each year. When she started attending Germany's equivalent of high school, their class time increased to three times a week for ninety minutes. At that point, they were spending time in language learning- grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation- but also began working in literary analysis. Schierwater found this to be one of her favorite parts of learning English as she "loved [her] English books and still remembers the characters."

## **Methods of Study**

Over her years as an English Language Learner, Schierwater reflected upon what helped her the most through her childhood and young adult life while learning. She commented that being able to listen to something while simultaneously reading it proved to be most effective in allowing her to understand grammar constructs as well as absorb accents and pronunciations. She is not currently actively studying English in a classroom or similar form. However, she stated that she still spends time with the language in terms of using social media in English as well as writing in English when doing things like notetaking, using her calendar, or jotting things down as lists. In terms of pop culture, social media, and education systems, English is extremely prevalent in German culture. Because of this, many Germans learn English fairly quickly (Shoebottom). In terms of what was least effective, Schierwater stated that trying to learn vocabulary entirely out of context proved to be almost useless to her. She needed to hear, read, or speak the words in their sentence context in order to absorb the meaning.

## **Opinion on English Language**

As previously mentioned, English is the most widely spoken language in terms of number of native and non-native speakers. Recently, Schierwater spent almost a year studying abroad in Turkey with other exchange students. She spoke positively of her experience in that she was able to speak to students from Russia, Brazil, Lithuania, Denmark and Slovakia, due to the fact that they all had English as their Lingua Franca, or common language (Furlow). This experience, combined with the ability to connect

with millions of other people across social media pages through English, is a testament to the accessibility of intercultural communication that English provides.

German and English have many linguistic similarities due to their connection as parts of the Indo-European language family. However, there are many differences in regards to verbs tenses as well as alphabetic and orthographic differences (Shoebottom). Additionally, Schierwater stated that she doesn't believe English is quite as "rich" as German. In German, there is a much wider range of verb conjugations, sentence structures, and vocabulary variations that allow more depth to the language (Schierwater).

## **Conclusion**

There are a wide range of benefits to learning English, including but not limited to, business and trade, medicine and science, and government and politics (Furrow). The interview with Schierwater is a great opportunity for further analysis into not only the benefits she found to learning the language, but also her experience as a language learner living outside of the United States. This primary research is an important perspective in connection to the intercultural communication that language learning of all kinds can provide.

### Works Cited

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