

# The Influence of English when Learning German

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## Introduction

In Japan, English is the first foreign language taught in schools and therefore the second language (L2) for most of the population. A second foreign language (hereafter the third language or L3) is usually not acquired until university, which differs from the situation in Germany, where the knowledge of at least two foreign languages is a prerequisite for graduation from high school. This article will look into L3 acquisition of German at university in Japan, and analyse what influence knowledge of English as an L2 has for both learners and teachers.

German and English are very similar, as both belong to the West Germanic family of Indo-European languages. The similarities can easily be seen in factors such as vocabulary (Hand/hand, Wind/wind, Schwein/swine, hart/hard, helfen/help), basic SVO word order (Ich trinke Tee/I drink tea), modal verbs (Sie muss lernen/She must learn), declension of verbs (singen-sang-gesungen/sing-sang-sung), the use of articles or pragmatic aspects like using negation to confirm negative questions. But there are also some differences between German and English,

notably the pronunciation of some letters, the German umlauts (ä/ö/ü, and the ß), verb negation and the rich varieties of German inflection (for more details, see Harbert 2006 or Speyer 2007).

### **Positive Influence of English**

With very few exceptions, university freshmen in Japan have studied English formally for at least six years, so that university teachers in charge of an L3 can build upon this typical language biography and use the previously acquired knowledge of English for their lessons. This is especially useful for teaching German, because of its similarity to English, as briefly shown above.

The most apparent positive influence of English is vocabulary. Looking at beginners' classes for German, many textbooks for use in Japan's universities start with a self-introduction, and thus the following words often appear: Name, Adresse, Straße, kommen, Universität, Musik or Hobby. In most cases, the students will be able to understand these German words either immediately, or after some time once they have realized that a slight change in spelling does not mean a different meaning – “although one is sometimes astonished at the inability of some students to recognize even such obvious cognates and common borrowings” (Banta 1981:129 about American students of German). The words above are either of Germanic origin (Name/name, kommen/come) or of Greek/Latin/French origin and a loanword in both English and German (Musik/music, Universität/university,

Adresse/address), or an English word which is a loanword in German (Hobby/hobby).

Similar words in German and English can also be found in various lexical fields such as family (Vater/father, Großmutter/grandmother, Sohn/son), weather (Sonne/sun, Mond/moon, scheinen/shine), calendar and time (Januar/January, Winter/winter, Freitag/Friday, Jahr/year, Monat/month, Minute/minute, Morgen/morning), body parts (Knie/knee, Arm/arm, Finger/finger), food and drink (Suppe/soup, Brot/bread, Salz/salt, Milch/milk, Bier/beer), sports (Fußball/football, Basketball/basketball, schwimmen/swim), animals (Kamel/camel, Katze/cat, Elefant/elephant), music (Klarinette/clarinet, Akkordeon/accordion, Trompete/trumpet), clothes (Jacke/jacket, Schuh/shoe, Socke/sock), colours (rot/red, grün/green, braun/brown), adjectives and adverbs (kalt/cold, warm/warm, bitter/bitter, frisch/fresh, praktisch/practical), verbs (fallen/fall, finden/find, waschen/wash, reparieren/repair) and numbers (sieben/seven, zehn/ten, hundert/hundred), to list only a few. There are also some German loanwords in English (angst, kindergarten, realpolitik), but as these are not normally found in beginners' texts, L3-learners cannot make any use of them.

The word order in English and German is the same, if we take an SVO-sentence (subject-verb-object) as the basic pattern: *Ich habe einen Computer / I have a computer*, or: *Peter isst einen Fisch / Peter eats a fish*. Beginners can therefore use their

knowledge of English syntax to construct a German sentence. However, German allows a far more flexible word order than English, and as long as the rule “the conjugated verb is the second element of a sentence” is observed, a lot of variations are possible. For example, to emphasize the object, the above sentence could be: *Einen Fisch isst Peter* (OVS), meaning an emphasis on Peter eating a fish rather than some other food, while a sentence like \**A fish eats Peter* has a different meaning in English. A longer German sentence with one more element would be: *Im Restaurant isst Peter einen Fisch*.

Subordinate clauses can stand before or after the main clause in German as well as in English (unlike in Japanese, where they normally have to come before): *Weil es regnet, spiele ich nicht draußen / Ich spiele nicht draußen, weil es regnet*; this is the same order in English: *Because it is raining, I am not playing outside / I am not playing outside, because it is raining*. Also, in this case the position of the conjugated verb differs in English and German. In the latter, it always stands in the last position of the subordinate clause. Anyway, the two aforementioned differences between English and German regarding the position of the conjugated verb are easy to understand for most students and will not lead to mistakes after a certain time period when they have familiarised themselves with German word order. However, experience has shown that the position of the German “nicht” or other varieties of negation are problematic for learners, as they

are only used to English verb negation, but not German sentence negation (see Tanaka 1996 for the differences in negation).

Tenses are very similar in English and German, as both languages have present tense and past tense, with the latter having three aspects: preterite/simple past, perfect/present perfect and the past perfect (progressive forms like past progressive do not exist in German). While there are differences in usage between German preterite and English simple past as well as between perfect and present perfect, the formation of the tense is very similar in both languages. In conversation-oriented beginners classes in Japan, the German perfect is normally taught before the preterite, and as it uses the same pattern as English, it is easy to understand: *Ich habe gefragt / I have asked*, with the auxiliary verb *haben / have* combined with the past participle, which is formed by the prefix *ge-* in German and the suffix *-ed* in English (both rules are only valid for so-called weak or regular verbs). The future tense is formed by auxiliary verbs as in *Ich werde Deutsch lernen / I will learn German*.

Modal verb constructions follow the same pattern in German and English, which is subject + modal verb (conjugated) + governed verb (infinitive), for example: *Marie muss heute zur Universität gehen / Mary must go to university today*. Also German modal verbs have a reduced inflexion (*ich kann, er kann, not: \*er kannt*), which is similar to English (*I can, he can, not: \*he cans*). Experience has shown that to explain modal verbs in

German, the easiest way is to write a German and an English sentence next to each other on the blackboard and let students figure out the meaning. The position of the governed verb in the last position of the sentence is already known from the German perfect, so this difference between both languages is no problem for bright students.

The explanation of how to show comparison using adjectives and adverbs can be done in a similar fashion to the modal verbs shown above. Students seeing *gut-besser-am besten* and *good-better-best* or *neu-neuer-am neuesten* and *new-newer-newest* on the blackboard are very likely to immediately understand that the formation of the comparative and superlative in German and English is nearly the same. In this case, German is even simpler than English, as the syntactical comparison of long adjectives (*difficult - more difficult - most difficult*) does not exist in German as shown in the corresponding *schwierig-schwieriger - am schwierigsten*. – It should be noted that German grammar is not always more difficult (or \*difficulter?) than English!

### **Negative Influence of English**

Besides the positive influence as described above, knowledge of English also has negative effects on learners of German. The main negative influence is interference from English when writing or speaking German. The reason for this interference is

of course the similarity of both languages. While it is not a big problem to catch the meaning of similar words like Sommer/summer, Montag/Monday or Buch/book, it is a lot more difficult to write the German words correctly without constantly checking the correct spelling in a dictionary. Table 1 lists some examples of English interference, which appear frequently in beginners' writing in German (but gradually disappear when their knowledge of German consolidates). Among these are spelling mistakes like sh instead of sch, mix-up of t/d and c/k or capitalisation.

Table 1: Spelling mistakes in German due to interference from English

German word	Incorrect German as written by students	English word
(ich) komme	comme, kome	come
alt	ald, olt	old
Deutsch, Fleisch, Englisch	Deutsh, Fleish, English	(sh instead of sch)
er lernt	er leart/learnt	he learns
gebackt, gebacken	gebacked	baked
Geburtstag	Geburtsdag	birthday
gepackt	gepacket, gepacked	packed
Hobby	hobby	hobby

ich	Ich	I
ist	is	is
ja	ya	yes
Jahr/Jahre	Jear, yahr, Jahrs	year/years
Kamera	Camera	camera
kann	kan, can	can
Klassenraum	Klassraum	classroom
Kühlschrank	Koolschrank, Coolschrank	cool
lessen	leasen	read
Maschine	Mashine	machine
Musik	Music, Muzik	music
Name	name	name
oder	order	or
Salat	Salad	salad
Salz	Saltz	salt
schwimmen	swimen, swimmen, schwimen	swim
Telefon	Telefone	telephone
trinken	drinken	drink
waschen	washen	wash
welcher	whelcher	which

Source: Author's collection.



When speaking German, students' utterances suffer interference from the English pronunciation of vowels and consonants alike. Examples are shown in Table 2. Actually, students seem to face larger problems with the articulation of German vowels and diphthongs than of consonants, although the pronunciation of German vowels is actually quite similar to Japanese ones. It appears that when using a language based on the Latin alphabet, prior knowledge of English dominates so much, that students are not able to recall the correct German pronunciation fast enough during a conversation. As modern

Table 2: Influence of English pronunciation in German words

German word			English word influencing students	
Spelling	Students' pronunciation	Correct pronunciation	Spelling	Pronunciation
alt	/əʊlt/ or /olt/	/alt/	old	/əʊld/
international	/ɪntənʌʃɪona:l/ or /ɪntənæʃənəl/	/ɪntənʌʃɪona:l/	international	/ɪntənæʃənəl/
kommen	/kʌmən/	/kɔmən/	come	/kʌm/
neun	/naɪn/ or /neɪn/	/nɔɪn/	nine	/naɪn/
studieren	/stʊdi:rən/ or /stʌdi:rən/	/ʃtʊdi:rən/	study	/stʌdi/

Source: Mayer 2011, with additions.

English is far from having uniformly pronunciation based spelling, German pronunciation is considered relatively easy for Japanese students among some educators (see Mayer 2011:11 and Oebel 2007:3). Further research seems to be necessary to find strategies to deal with the dominance of English pronunciation.

Finally, “false friends” should be mentioned. These are words that look and sound similar or even identical in German and English, but do actually have a different meaning in both languages. These words are not only problematic for Japanese learners of German, but also for Germans learning English and vice versa. Table 3 lists some false friends that appear in beginners’ German classes, although not all of them are problematic for students once they have been explained. Some even appear to alert students not to make a mistake, as the author has observed with *Hose* and *Rock*, however even advanced learners often use *also* in German sentences instead of *auch*.

Table 3: False Friends in German and English

German word	English meaning	False Friend	
		similar/identical English word	German translation
also	so, therefore	also	auch
arm	poor	arm	Arm
Art	kind, type, species	art	Kunst
bekommen	get, receive	become	werden
Brief	letter	brief	kurz
Chef	boss	chef	Koch
Dom	cathedral	dome	Kuppel
fast	nearly, almost	fast	schnell
Gift	poison	gift	Geschenk
Hose	trousers	hose	Schlauch
Hut	hat	hut	Hütte
Rock	skirt	rock	Felsen, Stein

Source: Author's collection and Pascoe/Pascoe 1998.

### **Conclusion and implications for classroom practice**

As we have seen, there is positive as well as negative influence from English (L2) for all learners of German (L3) at Japanese universities. Which influence is more dominant? Looking back over almost two decades, there have been a number of opinions

that the influence of English obstructs a successful study of German, because it leads to many mistakes. Habermeier and Mack (1995:20) say, “The partial similarity of English and German is undoubtedly a very strong source of error at all language levels”, while Klinger (1996:193-194) stresses that, “To *teach* the Japanese learners, that English and German are related, does create new interferences, and they are unnecessary. [...] the [...] strategy [to point out the similarities of German and English] is misdirected to a Japanese learner and will result only in further complication and confusion.”

However, the author of this article is in complete agreement with the newer findings of Gellert (2003), Klema (2006) and Oebel (2007) that prior knowledge of English is of great assistance when learning German. It is the teacher’s job to make use of the English structures and vocabulary that students know by helping them to connect new aspects of L3 with previous knowledge of L2. And even if the teacher tries to avoid any reference to English, the students will compare both languages anyway (Gellert 2003:241-242, Klema 2006:350-351, Oebel 2007:2). Taken as a whole, there are a much larger variety of positive than of negative influences from English when learning German, and the positive aspects by far outnumber the negative ones caused by interference. So how can the findings shown in this article be applied in the classrooms of Japan’s universities?

As the textbook is often the dominant tool in the language

classroom, it should be the most obvious source of support through using English when explaining German grammar and vocabulary. While most textbooks for German as a foreign language produced by German publishers cannot include any English (they are designed to be used in very different classrooms around the world), those made by Japanese publishers specifically for the Japanese market could include comparisons with, or references, to English. However, the author is only aware of two textbooks that make extensive use of English: Oiwa 1986 and Fukuda 1995. Fukuda's book is in pocket format and has 28 chapters, which sets it apart from the many other books that are typically used in university classrooms. Oiwa's book is in the more traditional A5-size and lacks colour graphics and pictures (the 2nd edition of 2002 is largely similar), making it unlikely to be widely distributed nowadays. All other books (and many are published every year, see Mayer 2007 or Eggenberg 2012) make occasional use of English, but do not use students' prior knowledge of English in an extensive and systematic way (see also Gellert 2003:235, Klema 2006:346).

Therefore, it comes down to the individual teacher. We can take it for granted that every German language teacher in Japan (regardless of mother tongue) knows at least basic English and is aware of the most important similarities between German and English as described in Chapter 2, and also knows the basic language biography of the students. As both the teacher and the

students have a passive knowledge of English, the use of English to explain German or to assist students' learning is not impossible. (The ability to use English is not crucial, because it is not spoken during class.) Further research into this subject is essential to give teachers the right strategies, so that the positive influence of the L2 is maximized while the interference is minimized.

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