Teaching English at University Level

"English at German universities" is a very disparate field, and much more so than "English at German schools," which has many common parameters throughout Germany. There is a wide range of different English courses at German universities and their implementation in the curriculum varies from university to university. Research on and within English at university is scarce, the reasons being that research on it is not institutionalized and most input comes from best practice examples and practitioners in the field. In this article, we concentrate on describing the state of the art of "English at university."

In order to gain an overview, we have looked at English language programmes at German universities. We chose universities with more than 20,000 students to ensure that there is a language centre and a department of English and American studies with a broad range of English courses. From these, we have made a selection of 14 universities in order to have a variety of German federal states (Bundesländer). These universities are: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Universität Hamburg, Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Technische Universität Dresden, Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Universität zu Köln, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena and Universität Potsdam.

Information is also taken from publications on teaching and research within a university context, mainly published by the Arbeitskreis Sprachenzentren (AKS), an organization of tertiary-level language centres in Germany.

In the following, we look at English courses in departments of English and American studies (hereafter referred to as "philology courses"), and at English courses for students of all subjects (hereafter "non-philology courses"). The latter, in particular, are very diverse and differ greatly from university to university. We have looked at the above-mentioned universities' English language programmes to find some common denominators using the following criteria: language level, degree of heterogeneity of teachers and learners, course content and formats, methodological diversity, certification and integration into degree programmes. We then discuss the non-philology courses in an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context before we look at the use of computer-assisted language learning and teaching in the university classroom. Finally some concluding remarks point out new research desiderata.

1. Language Classes in Philology and for Students of Other Subjects

Philology courses are mostly offered by English Studies, rarely by the university language centres (e.g. at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg). The courses play an important role within English teacher education, which is due to the fact that language proficiency tests are part of the state exam for future teachers. The
system of English courses for students of all subjects varies greatly from university to university regarding course format and content. These courses are mostly offered by the language centres and there is no overlap between courses for students of English and for students of other subjects.

1.1 Language Level

Only students with an advanced level of English can study English as a university subject; this level is mostly ensured via an entrance test (sometimes combined with the Abitur grade) and the required level is B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. English classes progress from introductory level to exam level.

Non-philology courses mostly start from pre-intermediate or intermediate level (A2 or B1), taking into account that English is a compulsory school subject in Germany. Only very few universities also offer beginners’ courses for foreign students. The level is mostly determined by an entrance test.

1.2 Degree of Heterogeneity of Teachers and Learners

In contrast to teacher education for teachers of English at schools, there is no formalized teacher education for university teachers of English. A review of the most recent job advertisements for teachers of English shows that the basic requirements are a (language related) degree, a teaching certificate and teaching experience. There are many kinds of positions for English teachers (e.g. Lektorinnen, wissenschaftliche Angestellte and Lehrkräfte für besondere Aufgaben), who most often are native speakers. These positions are often non-tenured and limited to just two or six years. A lot of teaching is also covered by freelance teachers (Lehrbeauftragte), who are paid on an hourly basis. Many of these positions are notoriously precarious (see Voss 2005, 210-211) and at the bottom of the university hierarchy. The teaching load varies greatly and also depends on administrative tasks, but can be as high as 24 teaching units (45 minutes each) per week. Lehrbeauftragte may teach up to 9-10 teaching units per week. The rationale behind these kinds of precarious contracts – on the surface – is the need to have rotating teachers who come straight from an English-speaking home country and make it possible for students to be exposed to different English varieties and cultures. The more mundane reason is to save staff costs and to be flexible in the allocation of tenured positions. Needless to say, this arrangement accounts for much job frustration for English teachers in non-tenured positions and those in tenured position, who have to take the burden of all the long-term tasks, like curriculum development and tests. University teachers of English have far greater responsibilities than their precarious employment status would lead one to expect, as Voss points out:

Fremdsprachenlehrer im Hochschulbereich sollen Sprache und Kultur eines anderen Landes verkörpern, sie sollen sich […] in allen Wissenschaftsgebieten ebenso auskennen wie in den Ergebnissen der Sprachlehrforschung, sie sollen professionellen, hochschulspezifischen Fremdsprachenunterricht erteilen und Experten sein für die Überprüfung und Zertifizierung fremdsprachlicher Leistungen […] (Voss 2005, 204).

 Whereas learners in philology courses form quite homogeneous groups, learners in non-philology courses are very heterogeneous as they are drawn from all subjects.
Typically, there are many foreign students with different language learning experiences and backgrounds. This makes for an interesting research area within the field of multilingualism, as yet unexplored in a university context.

There are a lot of reasons why non-philology students attend English courses, their integration into BA/MA programmes not being the only one. Other reasons are a planned stay abroad (for working or studying), preparation for a degree course in English or preparation for a future job for which English proficiency is an absolute requirement.

1.3 Course Content and Formats

Since English courses for students of English who are studying for a teaching degree (Lehramt) prepare them for the first state exam, the course formats and contents reflect test contents. These vary slightly from federal state to federal state, but mostly include text production, translation from English into German, oral proficiency and grammar. The modularized language courses in English teach linguistic skills and competencies such as text production, translation and mediation, conversation, oral presentation and phonetics. English courses for other English Bachelor and Master programmes are largely the same as those for future teachers of English. There are not many English courses that mirror students' specialized fields of study within literature, education, culture and linguistics, unless one takes the component 'academic' (writing, presentations, etc.) as a signal word for English for Specific Purposes.

In contrast to these philology courses, the non-philology courses tend to be restricted in their scope. Unless the courses are geared towards students of a specific faculty or subject (more on this in the chapter on ESP), they mostly offer "General English" or "English for Academic Purposes," covering language skills needed in an academic context.

For philology and non-philology courses alike there are not many course books that are suitable for an academic course. Publishers have only recently started to produce more course material specifically for university English courses that differ from English for adults materials, for example the Cornelsen Campus series or Macmillan English Campus, an online practice environment. However, judging from course descriptions, most English teachers do not use course books at all but develop their own teaching material or adapt already existing material to their clientele. A typical semester course is offered once a week over the course of a semester and lasts 90 minutes. Non-philology courses are also offered as intensive courses during the semester break.

1.4 Methodological Diversity

The distinction of philology and non-philology courses is partly mirrored by different methodological approaches. While linguistic accuracy seems to be more important for the philology students, especially for future teachers who are expected to transfer their language competence to their learners on a rather normative level, the focus in non-philology courses has more significantly shifted to fluency in a communicative context. The overall aim in these courses is language proficiency, which is defined as an abstract concept entailing "knowledge" of linguistic structures and "skills" to accurately process phonetic, lexical and grammatical information receptively and...
productively in utterances that could occur in a communicative situation (based on Hulstijn's (2007) core language proficiency). It remains the task of the university teachers to adapt knowledge and skills to the communicative situations the students need to master.

Rather traditional methods are still applied in both types of courses – always depending on the teaching competence and background of the university teachers. The non-philology courses, which are taught by an even more heterogeneous group of teachers (see above), seem to offer a wider range of methods which are implemented into the respective communicative context. Quite frequently these courses make use of a variety of social settings and new media, which is reflected in their course descriptions.

**1.5 Certification and Integration into Degree Programmes**

The most commonly applied system of language education and certification at university level is "UNIcert®" (see Voss 2010 and http://www.unicert-online.org). This system aims at standardizing especially non-philology course programmes in order to promote quality and to make these programmes comparable. It provides a valid certificate that certifies language knowledge beyond the university. Its four levels (I-IV) are related to the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Half of the 14 universities' English programmes we have looked at are UNIcert® accredited: HU Berlin, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Göttingen, Münster, Tübingen, Dresden and Potsdam. There, students taking part in non-philology English courses are eligible for a UNIcert® certificate after completing courses (eight hours per level, so they take, for example, four two-hour courses or two four-hour courses) and corresponding standardized tests. Beyond UNIcert® there is hardly any standardization as far as testing and assessment is concerned.

In order to realize the European Higher Education Area as envisaged in the Bologna Declaration, degree programmes have been modularized. UNIcert® can fit in with this, for example when one whole UNIcert® level is integrated into a BA/MA degree programme. What can be integrated into a degree programme is a matter of negotiation between language centre and faculty, taking into account resources. An English course can be obligatory or a *Wahlpflichtfach* (elective) that can be chosen from a pool of language and other courses, mostly teaching *Schlüsselqualifikationen* (key competencies).

**2. ESP – English for Specific and Academic Purposes**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is one of the major features of ELT (English language teaching) at university, at least in non-philology courses, and has traditionally been used for the courses which concentrate on teaching the English language needed for specific purposes in academic and/or occupational contexts.

Back in 1998, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, 9) presented ELT as a continuum that ranged from General English courses to ESP courses.

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1 EGP stands for English for General Purposes; EGAP stands for English for General Academic Purposes; EGBP stands for English for General Business Purposes.
The integration of language and content in ESP courses (positions 4 and 5) is two-fold: there are courses where the content comes first and is explained in English – such as the following examples from the University of Münster: American Constitutional Law, British Constitutional Law, Australian Constitutional Law, where the law system of the countries is explained in English. But for a huge number of courses the integration has more of a support character, i.e. language comes first and is situated in content matter. For example, the course Figures and Numbers – English for Mathematics puts a focus on expressing the mathematical content in English, not on being able to understand how mathematical relations actually work. To illustrate the "support" idea where language is embedded into content we have chosen some examples from the University of Munich collection of English courses, such as Business English, Medical English, English for Sociology, English for Biochemistry, English for Biology, English for Physics and English for Pharmaceutical Sciences. In all these examples English is not used to explain the content but to describe and express the content in the foreign language. In the German university context the most frequently taught ESP courses are: Business English, Scientific English, Legal English and Medical English. Some universities offer ESP courses that are for students of certain faculties (e.g. "English Conversation for the Natural Sciences") whereas some universities offer more specialized ESP courses that are only for students of a specific subject, e.g. "English for Pharmaceutical Sciences."

The methodological approach in the university ESP courses seems to be rather wide: According to subject and topic, the use of vocabulary (terminology) and grammar varies in the continuum of ELT. The shift from accuracy to fluency has also reached most of the ESP courses, although the very specific contexts for some of them would demand a redefinition of these terms, as fluency in Mathematics has to be looked at from a different perspective than fluency in Legal English. The need of the learners to "communicate" in their specific subject area has – by some washback effect – led to a re-arranging of practical methods. The greatest shift has taken place in the use of media and the simultaneous growth of the importance of computer-assisted language learning (CALL).
3. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Self-Access Learning

Teaching English at university in the non-philology courses is characterized by a wide range of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) or rather computer-assisted language teaching approaches and procedures. This is particularly true in comparison to philology courses. As ESP courses are not situated in a language-context only, the use of media of all kinds is inevitable for presenting specific contents of other subjects ranging from business to science. The focus of ESP courses is on language use, which can best be illustrated in an authentic situation. Therefore using the internet and modern media seems to be a solution which is possible and useful inside a language classroom (for a theoretical and practical overview of this area see Klippel et al. 2007).

The use of specific computer language learning software inside the classroom has declined during the last couple of years, as most of these software solutions have no didactic advantage vis-à-vis traditional media. Technology must not define pedagogy, as McCarthy (2010, 732) puts it: "It is important that new technologies are integrated into learning and teaching only when driven by pedagogy, rather than technology for technology’s sake." As one attempt to combine the advantages of face-to-face teaching with those of computer-assisted learning, blended-learning scenarios have been developed (see a description of the parameters in Neumeier 2005). They are characterized by a systematic combination of face-to-face sessions and (self-directed) online sessions or phases. The individual work with language use in authentic situations offers a chance for learners to find their own learning preferences, their individual learning speed and sequences. Here they can combine their two roles – being a learner on the one hand and profiting from the availability of language-based situations via digital media, and being a language user on the other hand, i.e. being "forced" to directly use language via means of recording their language, communicating in various channels (such as forums, chatrooms or skype). The presently developing "social web" is rapidly changing the situation outside and inside the university and will influence the use of media in the near future (McCarthy 2010). Thus a continuous shift from the language learner to the language user seems to be a logical consequence and supports the idea of ESP courses inside the university English teaching area.3

In addition to language courses, most of the university language centres offer self-access facilities. These range from computer labs with specific self-access software to developing guided concepts where students receive a certain amount of instruction and help and, in return, have to deliver certain language products. This specific "give-and-take" program has turned out to be very successful as far as motivation and effectiveness are concerned (Raaf and Nalezinski 2007). This area, in particular, has seen a fair amount of research with implications for learning counseling, effectiveness of digital teaching materials and learner autonomy (Arntz et al. 2011). The latter refers to the learners’ competence for planning and monitoring their language learning, and is therefore an important concept in lifelong learning.

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2 The use of the term “authentic” has been widely discussed (Gilmore 2007). For us “authentic” means that it is part of a real-life situation which has not been designed for teaching purposes only.

3 A discussion about which kind of English we should teach or rather use cannot be taken up here but seems to be inevitable – connecting this topic to the English as a lingua franca discussion (Seidlhofer 2005).
4. Concluding Remarks

English courses at university, and non-philology courses in particular, are very diverse. The lack of restrictions and uniformity has made for a great variety of teaching methods and course content. The area can therefore be seen as a motor of innovation. This, however, comes at a cost: the precarious situation of many of its main players, mainly the English teachers and the language centres.

On an administrative level, there should be more streamlining and cooperation between language centres throughout Germany to reach common standards in the area of certification and quality management. As far as research is concerned, there needs to be more exchange between practitioners that goes beyond the exchange of best practice examples. Formalized research has yet to be established, and the development of a research framework and research questions. This, in turn, requires more tenured teachers who are in a position to undertake the research.

We would like to conclude by proposing some research questions. In the area of philology courses for future English teachers it might be asked to what extent the methodology of language courses influences future English teachers’ didactic concepts. At the moment, language courses are not seen or indeed utilized as models for students’ later teaching. In these courses, are they being trained and equipped for foreign language classroom discourse at all? This leads to the relationship between the four areas of philology – linguistics, literature, EFL theory and language practice – in general: in how far can language and content instruction in philology cooperate reasonably, rather than just co-exist without much overlap? There are some best practice examples in this direction that need to be evaluated and further developed.

Some more general research questions in the area of philology and non-philology courses concern the actual content of general language courses: Which aspects of language are actually taught, and how? Is instruction in these courses effective, i.e. are learners’ needs met and do they progress through a level-system or do they drop out? Given the above-mentioned administrative restraints, can teacher development take place and how can the effectiveness of language courses be improved? These are general questions that need to be addressed longitudinally. Other areas of interest are multilingualism, learner autonomy, English for Specific Purposes and computer-assisted language learning.

Works Cited


