

REVIEW OF READING GERMAN

Title:	Reading German, 1997
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Demo Site:	http://web.arts.ubc.ca/mlc/GER/PROTECH.HTM
E-mail support:	protech@arts.ubc.ca
System requirements:	IBM PC or clone, capable of running Windows (3.1 or later), with CD-ROM capability
Price:	Instructors Package Reading German Level 1: includes volume 1, introduction text, and Level 1 CD: (\$ 500.00).
Target audience:	Anyone interested in gaining basic and subject-specific reading knowledge in German, in a self-study or course environment

Reviewed by Heidi Byrnes, Georgetown University

DESCRIPTION

This multimedia course for reading general and technical texts in German responds to a much-neglected and persistent need, namely, the challenge of teaching reading knowledge to an often quite heterogeneous group of learners. Learners may differ in terms of age, experience, developmental level, professional background and interests, ability, learning efficiency, and availability for regular classroom instruction. Developed at and distributed through the University of British Columbia, the two complementary components of *Reading German* (the textbook and the software), can be used both in conventional reading courses or as part of a self-study program. The textbook and the software are largely identical, with two exceptions. The text contains an extensive reference section including suggested reading strategies, a reference grammar, and a glossary of frequently used expressions, while the software contains answers to the questions and pedagogical tasks, sample summaries which learners can compare to their own notes, sound files for some units, and an approximately 300 word glossary. The documentation accompanying the program recommends, "ideally, students use the computer program and textbook side by side, but it is also possible to prepare tasks with the book only before checking answers

on the program." As I will discuss below, this ambivalence about the possibilities and limitations of the media being employed pervades the *Reading German* package, and ultimately detracts from the breadth of its conceptualization, the appropriateness of its didactic choices, and, most importantly for a computer-based program, from the innovativeness of the pedagogical tasks in which the learners engage as they learn to read German texts.

The material is divided into five modules. The first module, Level I, provides a general introduction to reading German and is designed to be completed first by all learners. The remaining four modules which make up Level II offer four specialized reading programs, one each in the humanities, music, business and economics, and chemistry, and can be completed in any order. Each module is subdivided into five to six groups which consist of five to six units, with each unit focusing on a single text. When the material is used within a regular university course, the projected pace of study is two units per week. Thus, a full semester course typically will cover the introductory module as well as one specialized module. Individual study can obviously result in a different pace.

The textual selections within the five units are intended to progress from what is termed "colloquial language" through "common language with some specific terminology" and "specialist's language," culminating in "scholarly language." Learners can complete all the texts within a unit, progressing from least to most difficult, or they may complete all the texts of roughly equal complexity from different units before progressing to the next complexity level and repeating this process.

The types of pedagogical tasks for each text are held more or less constant throughout the program, irrespective of the subject matter, the text type, or the learner's increasing reading abilities. These pedagogical tasks are arranged in near identical sequence for each unit, and require the learner first to read the entire text, then to choose certain specified linguistic features (which are primarily lexical and grammatical), take notes (which may later be compared to a teacher-provided answer), mark textual components according to the degree to which they are known to readers, evaluate such components as central or marginal to text comprehension, match vocabulary lists (usually English and German translations), mark multiple-choice or true-false answers, translate vocabulary items or concepts, and finally, to summarize the text.

EVALUATION

From the standpoint of reading research, the dual challenge to any adult L2 reading program is to activate literate readers' background content- and genre-related knowledge (top-down strategies), while also building up their text- and reader-based language abilities (bottom-up strategies). Reading courses are particularly well-suited to address this challenge because their focus on comprehension rather than production affords the opportunity to exploit these strategies with single-minded intent. Given what we know about the adult learner, SLA in general, and L1 and L2 reading in particular, this challenge and opportunity means that effective reading programs must maximally engage learners' cognitive processing and meaning-making capacity through a careful generative iteration within an overall progression of increasing processing demands determined by task complexity, task difficulty, and task performance conditions (Robinson, 2000; Swaffar, 1993).

While *Reading German* claims to be attuned to the methodological implications, particularly for computer-based materials, of such considerations in applied linguistics, it limits itself to only three avenues: first, the invocation of what it calls "reading strategies" which are akin to common-sense admonitions when the pedagogical tasks themselves do little to instantiate them in sophisticated ways (e.g., work from your strengths in learning, structure your learning process, draw on different sources of information, use your background knowledge, and form hypotheses); second, the extensive use of

grammatical explanations that have no meaning-oriented functionalist orientation, but instead are nearly identical to the structuralist and production-oriented grammar explanations of typical introductory college textbooks; and, third, the emphasis on various word-based strategies (e.g., near-identity across languages, names, what the program calls "internationalisms," and diverse derivational patterns) that are quite similar to traditional vocabulary lists. Thus, the program's recommendation to avoid overuse of dictionaries is unpersuasive when the tasks themselves do not engage learners in discourse-based and context-embedded creation of meaning for individual words but instead limit them to decontextualized and local issues which often have relatively little to do with the real meaning of the text, such as requiring them to match English and German vocabulary lists, answer true-false questions, and mark multiple-choice answers. Thus, the dangerous presumption that one has grasped the central meaning of a text simply by having identified the greatest number of tokens for a given word type (e.g., if "carbon monoxide" appears repeatedly, then the text must be about air pollution), appears here as a repeatedly invoked reading strategy, thereby omitting any consideration of authorial position, author intent, intratextual development of an argument, much less extra-textual linkages for a particular issue and its unique construction within a text.

In other words, what is missing is a discourse-based approach to reading, one which would challenge readers to use their topical background knowledge as well as their knowledge of major text organization patterns and the linguistic means by which such patterns are created (e.g., through the use of discourse markers) and to draw on their developing appreciation of what constitutes text coherence and cohesion for different genres. Ideally, such an approach would build up in its readers, through the different groupings of texts, a uniquely shared knowledge base which could subsequently be exploited pedagogically for increasingly sophisticated and self-directed reading strategies (Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991). Unfortunately, neither the bundling of the texts within a group nor the sequencing of groups reflects any such considerations. Instead, as stated above, the pedagogical tasks remain remarkably uniform--and thus fall remarkably short of what might have been done with this medium, in terms of innovative pedagogies in support of reading development.

Other problems with this software include the texts themselves. These are generally short, bland excerpts, with little indication of the overall context or of what has been eliminated. One exception is the business and economics module, which contains some of the longest and most interesting texts and which together form a coherent argument since they are consecutive parts of a more in-depth treatment of the topic. Also problematic is that sources, including dates, are often missing. Moreover, with the exception of tables and bank ledgers in the economics section, no attempt has been made to emulate the layout of authentic texts (through the use of titles and subtitles, columns, graphic material, or special fonts) and there is no visual material other than the rather standard fare of pictures of famous personalities like Einstein and Beethoven. Surprisingly, these graphics are in the printed text rather than on the CD!

The pedagogical tasks that form the heart of *Reading German*, do not advance beyond the standard fare of most reading comprehension activities in college textbooks in that they ignore the importance of the learner's processing focus (English or German), they do not differentiate between comprehension and production tasks, they reflect only limited awareness of the intricate interrelationship between top-down and bottom-up processing demands, and/or they fail exploit of the possibilities of the computer medium. Given the current state of the art in computer-assisted language learning, and the increasing dialogue with SLA research as evidenced in this millennial issue of LLT, it is hard to justify the reliance on translation tasks with largely unmotivated vocabulary items when an on-line dictionary (or, better yet, a well designed concordancer) might have afforded learners the opportunity to engage in more meaningful activities which foster attention to meaning-form relationships beyond the level of individual words. For example, activities could have been designed to promote recognition of discourse organization, major sentence patterns, syntactic consequences of pragmatic concerns such as backgrounding and

foregrounding, deictic references across sentence or clause boundaries, fixed and varied word order requirements, as well as compositional, derivational, and inflectional patterns. As it stands, the potentially useful resource of marking anything from entire passages to individual words with different colors remains largely untapped.

Another example of *Reading German's* failure to exploit the medium more fully is the display of texts: there is no split-screen which allows simultaneous viewing of a significant portion of a text while one explores it, layer by layer, for its increasingly richer meanings. Instead, many of the tasks become a tedious back-and-forth that is all the more frustrating because it is not possible to scroll back to a previous page within a multi-page task in order to revisit one's earlier answer. While the inclusion of an audio-component which supports visual and cognitive engagement with a text through listening is a good feature, the monotonous recitation of individual words, alphabetically arranged, and individual titles of literary works or operas is not helpful.

Similarly the possibilities for the provision of feedback are only marginally utilized. Feedback is restricted and restrictive in that it does not differentiate between incorrect spelling and incorrect answers and it is dependent on the precise number of words being provided for something to count as a right answer. This insistence on correct spelling (including capitalization) can be considered a reflection of the above-mentioned confusion between comprehension and production tasks and the excessive emphasis on word-level formal precision as well as of the technological shortcomings of the program.

The screenshot shows the 'Reading German' interface for the unit 'Krieg gegen die Umwelt'. It is divided into three main sections: 'group 1 unit 4', 'tasks', and 'mark'. The 'mark' section contains a list of color-coded options (gold, blau, rot, aqua, lila, grün, schwarz) and an 'instructor's solution' section with 'show' and 'hide' buttons. The 'tasks' section lists nine numbered tasks: 1. read, 2. choose, 3. mark, 4. input, 5. notes, 6. choose, 7. true/false, 8. match, 9. notes. The main text area displays a paragraph in German about environmental warfare, with a red line indicating a marking task. The interface also includes a 'GLOSSARY' and 'MENU' button, and a 'QUIT' button.

SUMMARY

In sum, what makes this program both so intriguing and forward-looking and at the same time so disappointing is that while it addresses an important niche in our field, it falls short on a number of crucial fronts. While the authors stress the importance of making connections between language knowledge and a range of academic and professional endeavors, the program does not draw from our ever greater

understanding of the nature of adult L2 reading and the intricate relationship between L1 and L2 literacy. It does not take into account the sophisticated pedagogical interventions that are now being advocated on the basis of cognitive-interactionist SLA research into the role of attention, awareness, and noticing of formal elements within an otherwise meaning-focused engagement with language, such as in reading. Nor does it reflect recent calls for task-based pedagogies to link meaning and form in learners' processing (e.g., Lee, 1999). And, most disappointingly, its use of the computer is so unadventurous as to justify the suggestion by the author himself that learners might just as profitably work with the printed text as with the CD-ROM version, if the text also included the answers that are currently found only on the CD. Perhaps this attempt at creating a wide-ranging reading comprehension program through the use of computer technology will inspire others to take up this worthy challenge.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

[Heidi Byrnes](#) teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the German Department at Georgetown University. Most recently she has been working to establish a content-based and task-oriented integrated four-year curriculum in her department. Her particular interest is in advanced L2 acquisition by instructed adult learners.

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