

Episode 105: Learning German

Summary

Nick's brother Tim returns to the podcast to talk about his experiences learning German while living in Germany, both as a teenager and as an adult.

Transcript

Nick: Today I am in a park in Munich, Germany, and I'm here with my brother Tim. Tim, welcome back!

Tim: Hi Nick.

Nick: And last time when you were on the podcast when you went to Germany when you were a teenager. And what we didn't really talk about at the time was that the reason you went was because you were learning German in high school in Australia. And you went to Germany on an exchange program, right?

Tim: That's correct.

Nick: So we had a German student who came to live with us in our house in Sydney for a couple of months, and then you went to stay with him in Germany.

Tim: Yes. Uhh, I was, I guess, 16 at the time. I was in Year 10 or Year 11 at high school and, uhh, I spent a very few ... a very cold few months, I should say, in, uhh, in the very northern part of Germany as an exchange student.

Nick: So what I wanted to ask you first was that, do you remember why you chose to study German or do you remember what the other options were for languages in high school?

Tim: Yeah, strangely enough, umm, the options for language when I was at high school, which was a long time ago, were, uhh, German and French, typically. And of course that's a very English, uhh, curriculum¹. It's sort of come straight from the, umm, the United Kingdom and doesn't make a lot of sense in Australia. You're far better off² learning one of the Asian languages or one of your closest neighbours' languages like Indonesian. Uhh, but I had a very good teacher in German and

¹ curriculum: learning program in a school or university

² better off: in more favourable conditions, in a better situation

that's what prompted³ me to continue with it, because when the teacher makes it interesting and enjoyable, uhh, then you can really engage with the subject. So I just genuinely enjoyed my German, uhh, lessons at school and so that's where it started.

Nick: That's great because typically high school language teaching in countries like Australia is pretty poor and students don't really learn much. Umm, they're taught to pass tests rather than to speak the language, so it's great that you had a good experience with it.

Tim: It is indeed.

Nick: It's also interesting that, yeah, like you said, uhh, French and German, typically large European languages, were what were taught. Our parents studied French and German when they were in school. I'm six school years younger than you and by the time it came time for me to choose languages, Japanese was the really popular one. This is in the early 1990s, because in Australia we had a lot of, uhh, Japanese investment in the 1980s. And it's funny that they really thought that Japanese was going to be the next big language for Australians to learn, and then of course soon after they realised it was going to be Chinese. And I assume now that Australian schoolchildren are learning Chinese. I don't know, but I assume so.

Tim: I don't know either, but I suspect that, uhh, Chinese, umm, and probably Japanese and maybe Indonesian would be quite common, umm, which makes a lot more sense, I think, for Australians.

Nick: So when you went to Germany, you must have had special German classes but additionally, you must have just gone to the regular classes that the German students were going to.

Tim: I did, and admittedly I didn't understand anything. So I had a terrible time. At one point I remember vividly getting told off. I was ... if you can imagine trying to learn Greek in German when your grasp⁴ of German is minimal at best, so I gave up and just put my headphones at one point on during the class and I got told off⁵. I think I nearly got a detention. Umm, but it was just really, truly beyond me to learn another language via German. Umm, so I have to say that I did very much struggle. Uhh, the quality of ... the level of my German compared to my, uhh, exchange student's level of English was like chalk and cheese⁶.

Nick: Yeah, because I remember - and I wasn't really aware of what your level of German was at the time - but I remember when Heiko, who was the exchange

³ prompted: inspired, moved, caused

⁴ grasp: understanding, knowledge

⁵ told off (colloquial; phrasal verb: to tell off): reprimanded, punished

⁶ like chalk and cheese (expression): very different

student, when he arrived, we were very impressed with his level of English at age 16, 17. It was much better than we thought it would be.

Tim: Absolutely. I think in Europe, in general, languages are taken very seriously. They're also taught much, much earlier. You don't wait until you get to high school, uhh, to start learning a language. It's part of your curriculum from primary school onwards. And of course, the other thing is, English is very much throughout popular culture. So a lot of television shows or movies or certainly music - in particular music - umm, is heavily influenced by English. And the charts⁷, the popular music charts, you might find in Germany, are not massively different to what you'd find in an English-speaking country. A lot of the songs on there are English, so people are naturally exposed to the language from a young age, umm, you know, through music and television.

Nick: And so did you find this period that you spent in Germany, did it help your German or was it, like you said, just so difficult in certain ways that you almost didn't make that progress?

Tim: I don't think I made a whole lot of progress actually. I've made far more progress, uhh, since. Uhh, and the interesting thing about learning a language, I think, is that you actually have learn English first. And that took me completely by surprise. Because you need to learn about sentence structures and cases and gender and, uhh, conjugations and things like this. And if you don't know that in English, it's very, very difficult to learn it in another language. So I found myself actually having to revisit ... umm, and I was never very good at English at school anyway. So trying to relearn English first helps significantly in learning German, yep.

Nick: So, I don't know German, so you'll have to help me out with this, but just thinking about the language compared with English. They're obviously both Indo-European languages and they're both on the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family tree, so there's a lot of similarities. They essentially both come from proto-Germanic that was spoken, umm, outside the borders of the Roman Empire. So what are the challenges, specifically with German, do you think?

Tim: I think the challenge that takes you by surprise a little is gender. And it's probably the same in many other European languages, in fact I think it is in French and Spanish and Italian, but, uhh, in English, of course, it's really only human beings that have gender - or objects that are alive. Uhh, in German every object has a gender. So a table, uhh, for example, is a male. Umm, you know, a ship is a female, or whatever. Umm, I probably even got that one wrong. But the, umm, the difficulty is not just learning the gender, umm, but then all the cases and different forms that goes with that. So that's complicated.

Nick: Right, and so, yeah, the Latin languages have genders. But doesn't German also have a neutral gender?

⁷ charts: ranking list of the most popular songs at any given time

Tim: Yes it does. Uhh, that's right. There's masculine and feminine and neutral, uhh, so that makes it even harder.

Nick: So after you got back from Germany when you were younger, it seems that maybe you weren't really encouraged to continue with German and then you spent - what? - 20 years probably not thinking about German at all. And then you've recently come back to it in the last few years. So what inspired you to restart with German again after such a long absence?

Tim: I think the fact that I didn't actually need to restart completely from scratch was probably my main motivation. I wanted to ... I felt slightly inadequate, uhh, living in - I've been living in, uhh, London for eight years and Berlin for nearly six months now - and, uhh, Europeans in general are very proficient, uhh, at other languages and I couldn't believe that, really, I just knew English. And so I thought to myself, 'I'm going to make that a mission,' uhh, for me to really improve my German. And I didn't want to start from scratch⁸ so hence⁹ I picked, I chose German, 'cause I had a little bit of a background there.

Nick: And so how's that been going the last few years, and especially the last few months that you've been living in Berlin?

Tim: Well, I can order a beer and a schnitzel.

Nick: Well, that's all you need!

Tim: I've got restaurant German. Can I have the bill please?

Nick: And so beyond that, do you ... are you able to have conversations with people, or what do you ... how would you rate your level, I guess?

Tim: So officially I'm roughly at B2 level on the official scale, which really is, umm, I suppose, beginner to intermediate. Umm, I still feel that by and large¹⁰ most Germans can speak English better than I can speak German. Umm, but that's OK. You've got to start somewhere, so I'm improving all the time.

Nick: And are you finding living in Germany that that exposure to the language is really helping, insofar as, I don't know, television or radio and things like that?

Tim: Yes, uhh, I find that one of my challenges is to not have the person speak back to me in English. And sometimes that works and sometimes that doesn't. So I do make an effort. Uhh, certainly television, umm, helps. I find that watching a German show with German subtitles is perhaps one of the best ways, umm, to

⁸ start from scratch (expression): start from the beginning, start with zero knowledge

⁹ hence (formal and not used frequently in spoken English): therefore, as a result

¹⁰ by and large (expression): overall, in general

assist your learning, whereas finding ... it's usually easier to understand if there are English subtitles but your learning ability, or your learning capacity, is perhaps lessened, yeah.

Nick: Alright, well thank you very much for talking to us again, and good luck with your German.

Tim: Thank you Nick.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Tim like studying German at high school in Australia?
2. What was it like for Tim going to school in Germany as an exchange student?
3. Why did Tim restart German after a long absence?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. After studying the language for years, he still didn't have a good _____ of even the most basic concepts and eventually he gave up.
2. Now that she's divorced, she'd be _____ moving back to her home town where she would have the support of her friends and family.
3. Their new song is getting a lot of play on radio and in the last couple of weeks it has rocketed up the _____, all the way to the top 10 this week.
4. I'm happy with my situation, _____. There are some little things that upset me sometimes, but overall things are going well.
5. She detested both presidential candidates and, _____, she didn't even bother voting.
6. The boys got _____ by the school principal for being late to class.
7. If you compare her new boyfriend to her ex-husband, it's _____. They couldn't be more different.
8. He took guitar lessons when he was a kid but he's forgotten everything, so if he wants to pick it up again he'll have to _____.
9. The school finally changed its _____ to include a bigger focus on technology. It also eliminated some subjects that are considered outdated these days.
10. His health has been deteriorating for a while but he wasn't too concerned about it. Then when he started having trouble breathing, that finally _____ him to go and see a doctor.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever studied German, or even heard people speaking German? What do you think of the language?
2. Tim talked about the difficulty of studying a language where nouns have genders (unlike English). Does your native language or any language you've studied have use gender in this way? Do you think it's difficult to learn?
3. What is language learning like at school in your country?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He liked his teacher, who made the classes interesting and enjoyable.
2. He struggled because his German wasn't good enough to follow all the classes, especially other language classes.
3. He was living in London and felt inadequate about speaking only one language while being surrounded by Europeans who spoke multiple languages, so he decided to get back into German.

Exercises

1. grasp
2. better off
3. charts
4. by and large
5. hence
6. told off
7. like chalk and cheese
8. start from scratch
9. curriculum
10. prompted