Assessment Oversight Committee Report for the German Program
Competency Requirements and General Education Assessment Fall 2010
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Introduction

For the purpose of this assessment, German 1240, German 1340, German 2240, and German 2340 have been reviewed to evaluate whether students taking these courses meet basic competencies for UW-Platteville requirements and/or the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in Humanities. German 3000, German 3330 and German 3530, which also count in Humanities, have not been assessed at this time, as I have not had the chance to teach these courses.

While the goals and objectives of German 1240 do not meet basic competencies nor does it count for Humanities credits, it has been assessed, because it is an important building block for students to successfully reach foreign language competencies in German 1340. Typically, German 1240 is taken by those students who have not had the opportunity to study German during their secondary education. Students with previous German background are able to test into German 1340 or higher. Students successfully completing German 1340 demonstrate competencies in foreign language requirements and also in SLOs for Humanities. German 2240 and 2340 fulfill general education requirements in Humanities.

Foreign Language Competencies

Students should be able to use a language other than English. A course meeting competency requirements in a foreign language is designed around two competencies:

Competency 1: Students obtain basic skills in speaking, writing, listening and reading in a language other than English.

Competency 2: Students obtain cultural knowledge related to that language.

Summary

I believe that students do gain both competencies after completing German 1340. Improvements have been made especially in Competency 1 in terms of speaking skills. In the future, teaching students explicitly how to provide a short argument, e.g. creating a rubric, would be helpful in targeting Competency 2.

Competency 1

German 1240 and German 1340 focus on four basic skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing in the German language. To gain basic competencies in speaking and listening, students are offered multiple opportunities to practice the spoken German language. Students are required to attend the language laboratory weekly in order to gain speaking and listening skills. In
addition, about 2/3’s of the instructional time is spent in partner work, which provides ample opportunities for students to use the language. The partner work activity also prepares students for the oral exams, which are administered four times during each semester. Formerly, students had to take only two oral exams in both German 1240 and in German 1340. The last performance of the students in German 1340 was an area of concern in the past. Since the time the students are required to complete four oral exams during each semester, their oral proficiencies appeared to improve. The oral exams also measure the students’ reading skills, in which students consistently achieve well. In general, students in German 1240 and 1340 demonstrate the required level of competencies in writing in the German language as it is evident in the daily written homework assignments and in the four written essays that they have to produce throughout the semester.

Competency 2

Both in German 1240 and 1340, social and cultural aspects of the German-speaking world are introduced. While German 1240 targets the surface elements of the culture, such as sports and food, German 1340 introduces students to the deeper aspects of the target culture(s), such as the educational system of Germany, which allow discussions about fundamental differences in values. While the in-class discussions offer the opportunity to informally assess students’ understanding and misconceptions about the concepts, as a formal assessment, 6-8 percent of each test focuses on cultural issues. Furthermore, the oral exams are contextualized in a way that students are expected to use the language in culturally appropriate ways. Typically, students do well with the cultural aspects of the language, and in general, they find the discussions interesting. However, on the tests, students appear to have problems with the articulation of their ideas in English both in German 1240 and 1340. To address this problem, the development of a rubric containing the basic elements of a short argument would be helpful.

Humanities

The purpose of the study of humanities is to explore the range of human thought and experience - achievements and failures, joys and sorrows, comedy and tragedy, life and death. It should challenge students to understand and evaluate how others, past and present, historical and fictional, have struggled with these issues.

SLO #1: Students will understand some of the diverse approaches to questions of human meaning and value.

SLO #2: Students will demonstrate competence in critical thinking, reading and writing.

SLO #3: Students will acquire tools for lifelong learning in the humanities.

Summary

The assessment indicates that German 1340, 2240, and 2340 help students to understand some of the diverse approaches to questions of human meaning and value, and students acquire tools for lifelong learning in the humanities. I believe that students in general demonstrate competencies
both in SLO #1 SLO #2. While the courses do address the development of critical thinking, reading and writing skills (SLO #3), after reviewing the assessment tools, I think that more emphasis could be given in particular to critical writing skills especially in German 2240.

SLO #1

Students taking German 1340 and 2240 are introduced to a variety of cultural issues, such as the recent cultural, political, and social histories of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and they are expected to be able to compare the issues of the target culture(s) with the United States. For example, in German 2240, in the context of Switzerland, students are introduced to the idea that a country can have more than one official language. In that discussion, questions such as what is the value of bilingualism, what is the nature of a language, how do culture, language, and identity relate, and how is language often politicized are examined. In these courses, students also become familiar with authentic German texts such as poems, advertisements, and songs, which provide further opportunity to investigate cultural differences and to appreciate a variety of perspectives on human experiences.

In German 2340, students read a number of short stories and a novel and watch a German movie. Besides decoding the text and acquiring new vocabulary and grammar knowledge, students also analyze the pieces within their cultural, social, and political context.

In general, students do demonstrate competencies in SLO #1, which is assessed during partner work, group discussions, quizzes, tests, and oral exams.

SLO #2

Students are given many opportunities to develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills in German 1340, 2240 and 2340 especially through the discussion of the diverse aspects of German-speaking countries and through the introduction of authentic texts in German. I believe however that improvement can be made by extending assessment tools to specifically measure the students’ critical writing skills in the German language, especially in German 2240.

In German 2240 about half of the students are freshmen. Even though many of them have as much as four year experience with the German language, some of them have serious deficiencies in the area of grammar. In general, these students want to pursue a major or minor in German, and thus, much re-teaching has to happen making sure that all of the students are prepared for the demands of German 2340. As a result, in German 2240 the assessment mainly focuses on grammar; and thus, it is recommended to change the grading criteria with more focus on the students’ critical writing skills.

In German 2340, on the other hand, through reading authentic German literature, students are consistently challenged to provide a critical analysis of the texts, and the exams are already designed in such a way that students have to demonstrate their ability to think, read, and write
critically. In German 2340, students also have to prepare a presentation, in which they introduce and analyze a newspaper article on a current topic from the German press. Part of the grade is based on the students’ critical view on the issue on hand.

SLO #3

The nature of learning a second language is such that students are continuously asked to relate the aspects of the target culture(s) and language to their own, and thus to connect the academics to their personal experiences. It is anticipated, that through this reflective process, they discover the value of learning not just to fulfill academic requirements and to receive a degree but also to understand their own human existence. Hopefully, this learning experience will continue after their graduation from UW-Platteville. While assessing this goal is somewhat difficult, there are indications that students do develop an interest in learning for its own sake.

In German 1340, German 2240 and German 2340 students are required to seek out two out-of class activities that enhance their understanding of the culture and life in the German-speaking world. German Club offers many opportunities for students to have access to such events. We organize German movie nights, Kaffee Stunden, and trips, for example to the Milwaukee Jewish Museum and theaters featuring plays from the German culture. Students also can read a newspaper article or a book, or learn about a person who made any contribution to the world. While typically students do not welcome this assignment in the beginning of the semester, after completing the first activity, they show much excitement about what they have learned, and generally look forward to their second event. It is hoped that this assignment in conjunction with the in-class discussions, sparks a desire in students to continue learning even after finishing the German courses.