

Learning German in Germany

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As a student of Hispanic Studies and Linguistics, I think, read and write about language all of the time. I had spent my previous academic year in Zaragoza in Spain as part of my degree, and spent July 2014 in Freiburg, Germany. During this time, I had come to realise that to learn and improve in a foreign language effectively, to be immersed in and surrounded by the day-to-day use of the target language has an incredibly positive effect. Before my trip to Freiburg I had studied Spanish at university for two years and felt that I learned more German in four weeks than I had in my regular Spanish classes at university. The key is practice, and to be practicing all day every day, in addition to taking formal classes, is time well-invested.

So I decided to plan another summer of language learning and aimed to speak as little English as possible during my trip. Initially I wanted to avoid Berlin and choose somewhere a little smaller, less touristy and somewhere, well, more German. I wanted to study for four weeks as this had served me so well in Freiburg the previous year, and I was quite restricted in terms of available space in my summer diary, so I had a small 4-5 week window in which to squeeze my trip. I explored possibilities in Hamburg, Heidelberg and Leipzig, but unfortunately the language schools were quite small, with very little flexibility in terms of start and end dates and many were closed for the summer break. I chose a school in Berlin after all, *Sprachenatelier* (roughly “language workshop”). It offered weekly start dates, the course length was completely flexible and students were essentially able to tailor the course to meet their own needs.

Luckily I already knew one or two German people living in Berlin, but I’d heard that to find mid- or long-term accommodation there was painful and often expensive. Having lived in London, this didn’t scare me too much and I

quickly found that the rooms there were normally two or three times the size of your average London student room and about half the price. Through one of my German friends, I actually found a room quite quickly in a shared student apartment in Wedding, in the north west of the city. The room was cheap, huge and included daily use of the usual occupant’s bicycle! Students in Germany, as in the UK, tend to move around a lot in the summer, travelling, visiting parents, and so on. As such, there were a lot of comings and goings and in total I lived with seven different people and at times was the longest serving housemate. It made for interesting conversations in the kitchen, with a Portuguese artist, an Austrian cellist and a Syrian medical student, amongst a few other German students that spent time in the flat. We occasionally cooked and had a beer together and, although my housemates were not all from Germany, the *lingua franca* was always German (or at least our version of it!).



My German language school, Sprachenatelier.

My German course began a couple of days after I arrived and the school was in Friedrichshain, quite far from where I lived. I think in hindsight I’d have taken a little more

care and found a place somewhere closer. Wedding has its own character and my flat was great, but not only was it far from school, but also quite far from most other places of interest in Berlin. Classes started at 9.30 every morning and lasted for three and a half hours, including a much-needed coffee break. The course began with a grammar test and a casual group conversation practice, a good way to get to know a few people and to work out our proficiency levels. I found my feet quickly and settled into the new class very well. I was delighted to find that my classmates were generally really enthusiastic, quite laid back and not afraid of making mistakes. This can be a problem in language classes and of all the language courses I've done the atmosphere in this one was undoubtedly the best. There was a diverse mix of ages and nationalities and everyone got along great. Due to the flexible nature of the school's course timetable, we had several different teachers at the school and at times this was quite disruptive. Some teachers were fantastic, some not so good. Students arrived and left each week as well and it was often sad to see our new friends go so soon. However, overall the learning experience was a good one.



Enjoying breakfast with classmates in Neukölln.

Outside of school, Berlin has so much to offer. I had previously visited the city as a tourist but there's a lot to be said for spending a longer period in a city so rich in culture and history. The school organised optional activities on a

daily basis, which allowed us to go to museums at discounted rates, to head out of town on organised trips and to enjoy a few social activities too, including a barbecue, a beer festival and a talent show.



Prenzlauerberg, part of my daily commute to school.

Most of all, my classmates and I found our own entertainment, embracing the nightlife, cuisine and the incredible music scene, as well as open-air cinema, German theatre and simply cooking together at each other's apartments. Despite the temptation to revert to English, we spoke German most of the time and the improvement we made as a result was remarkable.

Since the course, I have been concentrating mostly on my Spanish, but I intend to pick up German again in the summer from where I left off in Berlin. As a Linguistics student, the opportunity to learn German afforded to me by the QMUL expeditions fund has been invaluable. We regularly look at syntax from a cross-linguistic perspective and to add German grammar to my knowledge of Spanish and English frequently makes the understanding of otherwise complex concepts, such as grammatical case, so much easier. Furthermore, I am in the process of making postgraduate applications at home and abroad and, should I be accepted and choose to study in Germany, the basis I now have for living and working there is a strong one.