

## TEXTBOOK REVIEW

### **Denk Mal! Deutsch ohne Grenzen**

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### **Descriptive Summary**

*Denk Mal! Deutsch ohne Grenzen* is a German textbook for the intermediate level for higher education in the United States. It was developed by Tobias Barske (University of Wisconsin), Megan McKinstry (University of Missouri), Karin Schestokate (Oklahoma State University), and Jane Sokolosky (Brown University). The first edition was published in 2012 by Vista Higher Learning. The textbook is meant to be used for an entire academic year and consists of ten chapters. The explicitly stated objective of *Denk Mal!* is to strengthen students' language skills and to develop their cultural competency by taking an interactive and communicative approach. According to the authors, the book focuses on real communication in meaningful contexts in order to develop and consolidate students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Furthermore, the textbook was written with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL.org) and the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (ACTFL.org) in mind.

The textbook is divided into ten thematic chapters covering relevant vocabulary and grammar while introducing German cultural topics. The chapters are the following (in translation): (1) Feel and Experience, (2) Living Together, (3) Media Influence, (4) Traveling and Having Fun, (5) Art Treasures, (6) Traditions and Specialties, (7) Science and Technology, (8) Law and Environment, (9) Economy and Career Prospects, and (10) History and Society. Each chapter consists of seven different lessons, which are introduced and outlined by the *Inhalt* section. The introduction is followed by *Zu Beginn*, providing an overview of the lesson vocabulary, and offering matching, fill-in-the-gap, and open-ended questions. These kinds of activities can frequently be found throughout the book. One activity, for instance, is "Wie macht man Käsespätzle? - Ergänzen Sie das Gespräch mit Wörtern aus der Liste," which means, "How does one make cheesy noodles? Finish the dialogue with the words from the list." (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Fill-in-the-blank activity

**Wie macht man Käsespätzle?** Ergänzen Sie das Gespräch mit Wörtern aus der Liste.

braten	geschält	pikant	selbst gemacht	vegetarisch
fade	geschmeckt	schneiden	traditionell	zubereitet

**ARLINDA** Das Essen war hervorragend. Wie hast du die Spätzle (1) zubereitet ?

**LUKAS** Das geht ganz leicht. Zuerst habe ich eine Zwiebel (*onion*) (2) geschält.  
Dann muss man die Zwiebel klein (3) schneiden und in Öl (4) braten.  
Und den Käse muss man natürlich reiben (*grate*).

**ARLINDA** Aber wie hast du die Nudeln gemacht?

**LUKAS** Äh... ja... also... ehrlich gesagt waren die Spätzle nicht (5) selbst gemacht.  
Ich habe sie im Supermarkt gekauft.


**ARLINDA** Ist schon gut, Lukas. Das Essen hat trotzdem super (6) geschmeckt.  
Und nächste Woche mache ich ein (7) traditionelles mexikanisches Essen für dich... mit vielen scharfen Peperoni (*hot peppers*).

**LUKAS** Gut! Ich liebe (8) pikante Speisen.

The text provides instructions as to how to prepare a traditional dish, and asks students to fill the gaps using the provided vocabulary. The next lesson, found in each chapter, is *Kurzfilm*, and it features short films by contemporary German-speaking filmmakers. After completing pre-viewing activities (Figure 2), students watch the film, complete a descriptive matching exercise, and work on post-viewing activities. These exercises check for comprehension, pose easy opinion questions, and prompt learners to relate to the topic. Most activities in this lesson, as in the entire book, are to be completed with either a partner or in a group.

Figure 2: Pre-viewing activity

**5** **Was kann passieren?** Schauen Sie sich in Gruppen die folgenden Bilder an. Beschreiben Sie jedes Bild in zwei oder drei Sätzen. Überlegen Sie sich, was im Film passieren könnte (*could*).



- Warum telefoniert der Weihnachtsmann?
- Was macht der Weihnachtsmann im Wohnzimmer?
- Wer sind all die Menschen, die im Wohnzimmer sitzen?
- Warum feiern so viele Menschen im Wohnzimmer eine Party?
- Wie ist es zu dieser Situation gekommen?

The next lesson, *Stellen Sie sich vor* provides a region-specific reading, drawing students' attention to culturally significant locations and traditions. This short lesson is followed by 13 pages of *Strukturen* (grammar). The grammar examples are taken from the short film. Chapter 6 introduces (1) reflexive verbs, accusative pronouns, (2) dative pronouns, and (3) numbers, time, and quantities. Each grammar topic offers two full pages of explicit explanations and concludes

with another two pages of directed and form-focused exercises. The lesson ends with a synthesis, combining vocabulary, grammar, and lesson theme with a focus on speaking and writing. *Kultur* offers a reading text presenting additional cultural information related to the chapter theme accompanied by comprehension and open-ended questions. The chapter concludes with the last two lessons *Literatur* and *Wortschatz*. *Literatur*, similar to *Kurzfilm*, showcases literary readings by well-known German-speaking writers providing students with new ideas how to use the lesson's grammar and vocabulary. This lesson, too, is accompanied by pre- and post-reading activities. *Wortschatz* fills up the chapter's last page and displays a list of all new vocabulary introduced in the chapter.

### **Evaluative Summary**

It is widely agreed upon that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is highly desirable in the language classroom, and should therefore be reflected in foreign language textbooks (Long, 2015, Ellis 1997, 2003, Willis & Willis, 2007). Since *Denk Mal!* is a fairly new textbook claiming to be taking an interactive and communicative approach, in this review I try to determine whether the textbook is task-based and communicative.

In the beginning, the authors describe the textbook's objectives, structure, and content. What is noticeable is that the objectives are vague and do not include any form of Can-Do Statements or clearly formulated goals regarding the abilities students will have obtained at the end. The objectives simply read: "to consolidate students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills" and to "strengthen their language skills and develop cultural competency." The teacher, therefore, has no way of knowing what students will be able to *do*.

According to Ellis, tasks have to fulfill at least four criteria. They have to (1) involve a

primary focus on meaning, (2) have some kind of gap, (3) prompt students to use their own linguistic resources, and (4) tasks have to have a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome. The fact that the textbook does not provide a "clearly defined outcome" seems to set the tone for the book's activities. *Denk Mal!* frequently utilizes matching or fill-in-the-gap activities which do not address all of Ellis' criteria. These activities, although embedded in a bigger thematic context, do not primarily focus on meaning and do not prompt students to use their own linguistic resources. Tasks, in general, are not utilized in this textbook. The suggested lessons, however, given the well structured cultural content can often be supplemented with tasks. Open communication activities, for instance, usually only ask students to "discuss" questions, they neither guide students to a clearly defined outcome nor do they provide an actual gap. In order to follow the standards of task-based language teaching, the teacher could simply expect the students to present their partners' answers in a suggested way, maybe as a picture, a graph, a comparison etc. The same holds true for writing exercises. Students often have to simply write about a given topic: "Schreiben Sie ..." No pre- or follow up activities are suggested within the book.

Thematically, the textbook revolves around cultural topics, focusing on cultural competency. The book is communicative in the sense that students constantly learn about aspects of the German culture, so that they will have a better understanding of German society and social norms. The majority of the activities, too, are communicative as they ask students to work with a partner or group. Therefore, students are constantly presented with the opportunity to practice their speaking and listening skills. There is a good balance between the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), avoiding long stretches of individual, one-sided work.

When it comes to Nunan's (1991) five features of communicative language teaching (CLT) however, the textbook is only in parts communicative. Given the role play and group work

activities the book seems to support the idea of learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, it is surprising that vocabulary and grammar are always taught explicitly beforehand. *Denk Mal!* does use authentic texts, and they seem appropriate for young learners and their appropriate levels of text complexity and content. Nonetheless, there seems to be no evidence that the textbook implemented any other features of the communicative approach: (3) opportunities to also focus on the learning process itself, (4) an enhancement of learners' personal experiences as important contributing elements to learning, and (5) an attempt to link language learning with language activities outside the classroom. In other words, there is hardly any authentic communication and negotiation of meaning, which are crucial to communicative language teaching.

In summary, this is a great textbook for learners whose primary focus lies on learning about German culture, traditions, and conventions. Basically for students who are planning on going abroad. The book, overall, follows a rather traditional approach. This becomes apparent in the explicit teaching of vocabulary and grammar and also in the nature of the suggested *Denk Mal!* definitely has potential, and future editions could be adjusted in a way that complies with current researchers, namely following a communicative and task-based approach. Yet, the book is an excellent resource for experienced language teachers who know how to transform open communication and fill-in-the-blank activities into tasks, and who know how to allow for meaningful communication. Great advantages of this textbook are the authentic and interesting texts and topics that will guarantee students' attention. The draw back, however, is that the teacher will have to spend more time on the activity-transformation process.

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