

Teaching English at German and Swiss Technical Universities

Lenka Fišerová

The aim of this article is to provide Czech readers with information on teaching English at German technical universities (TU). The overview draws on the minutes from an eight German and one Swiss TU meeting held in November 2019 at Technical University München (Technische Universität München). Within her Erasmus+ visit, the author took part in the session.

Unlike Czech TU language departments, the German ones employ mostly a smaller number of on-contract full-time English lecturers (8–16 per a university) often outnumbered by free-lancers; the full-time lecturers are responsible for development of both course curricula and learning materials and the free-lancers concentrate on teaching students. Some full-time positions could be shared by two or more teachers; they might be funded directly by university departments.

The TUs offer mostly academic English courses focused on enhancement of all four skills and they also run others developing the individual ones, often writing skills. ESP courses are generally delivered on demand based on requirements and needs of individual university departments or institutes who then support financially their implementation. Writing courses for PhD students have become quite popular; they include scientific writing, grant writing, or socializing. Master thesis courses, when implemented, are fully enrolled. Some unis offer tailor-made courses in academic or specific English complemented with general English courses. At a Swiss university, bachelor and master students pay smaller enrollment fees; PhDs, alumni, and both academic and non-academic staff could also enroll paying significantly higher charges, course fees. Supervisor observations in courses are rather common at most institutions.

At a TU, a high number of lessons to be delivered is implemented via 15–20 Student Writing Fellows, who are native-level English speakers studying at the university and being paid standard rates for just under 6 hours of work a week. They are trained by acting as teaching assistants in writing courses, through videos currently being developed, and in shadowing sessions. Offering 45-minute consultations, their main task is to help students by consulting their needs, giving explanation and distributing hand-outs prepared by lecturers.

The TU language centers usually run their own Writing Centers to both guide clients throughout writing issues and to inspire or advise them on their way to becoming more skillful communicators/writers. Writing skills of the academic staff are enhanced via individual coaching. A project dealing with courses of En-

English as a medium of instruction will support the staff delivering their lessons in English. A TU also runs an intercultural tandem program that has in part been successful because of the university's long-standing relationship with a few US universities, which means a steady flow of native English speakers. The university also organizes and funds special courses to elevate its 30–40% of students performing below B2 to that level. German TUs mostly use placement testing either in supervised off-line form or in non-supervised on-line mode. Lower limits on class numbers range from 5 students to 15.

Using digital means of communication, some German TUs are supporting programs aimed at helping professors with lecturing in English and at enhancing their abilities to write and publish with high-quality journals. The support is provided via videos now being recorded. Some TUs also offer courses, in particular workshops, which are often customized for different departments dealing with field-specific topics.

Experiencing both struggle for survival and tendency to limit number of their staff or courses was expressed by several language centers.

The meeting of eight German TU deputies and one Swiss TU delegate was focused on mutual exchange of experience; the nine TUs are planning to organize regular sessions several times a year.

The author suggests establishing mutual contacts between Czech and German TUs; e-mail addresses could be provided on demand. She believes Czech university teachers might feel inspired by the information provided in the article.

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Autorka vystudovala obor organická chemie na Přírodovědecké fakultě a anglický jazyk a literaturu na Filozofické fakultě Masarykovy univerzity. Pracuje jako odborný asistent na Fakultě chemické VUT v Brně. Profesně se zaměřuje na oblast učebních stylů a strategií, propojení metodologie výuky jazyků a obecné pedagogiky, CLIL a techniky celoživotního učení se jazykům. Odborné zkušenosti získávala mimo jiné při studijním pobytu na University of Fremantle v Austrálii či na Londýnské škole Netlearn Languages.

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