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## Textbook Review- Anders Gedacht: Text and context in the German-speaking world

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**Motyl-Mudretzkyj, I., & Späinghaus, M. (2005). *Anders gedacht: Text and context in the German-speaking world*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 416 pp. US\$33.99 (paperback) ISBN: 978-1133607304**

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### Summary

*Anders Gedacht* is an intermediate high/advanced level German textbook, appropriate most likely for 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>-year students in a 4-year undergraduate German program. This textbook is content-based, written entirely in the target language with an accompanying workbook with supplemental exercises and activities, some of which are *tasks*. This book seeks to integrate aspects of German, Austrian, and Swiss culture through the use of culturally authentic materials such as stories, works of art, poetry, and film. This textbook offers additional exercises and materials through an online portal. The online component offers the opportunity for a hybrid curriculum as well as *flipping* the classroom.

This book stands out from other intermediate high/advanced German books because of its extra emphasis on Austrian and Swiss culture. The authentic materials used in this textbook will promote critical thinking and reflection as well as partner discussions. The authentic materials are linguistically challenging for an intermediate student, which is why it may be more appropriate for advanced-level courses. One of the justifications for using this book is that German language acquisition is viewed as a cultural experience. The language should act as a vehicle for students to learn about the culture as well as discuss and interact with the culture.

The book consists of ten chapters, each with its own topic (which range from art to history, to popular culture in the German speaking world). Each chapter also contains specific grammar structures noted in the table of contents. The chapters contain speaking and writing activities, reading activities, listening and visual activities, and lastly, corresponding internet activities. Although the topic for each chapter is different, the process in which the material is presented is fairly similar, which provides consistency for the teacher and the students.

*Anders Gedacht* has the following components: the core textbook with an introductory learning unit followed by the ten chapters, an audio cd for classroom use by the instructor, a student activities manual (workbook) with grammar exercises and other activities, an online portal which corresponds with the workbook, and there is also a password protected instructor website that provides teaching suggestions, testing guidance, and transcripts of the audio

activities in the workbook. Due to the fact that the instructor website is password protected, it cannot be evaluated; however, it would be interesting to see if the website provides any scaffolding materials for the tasks in the textbook. It would also be interesting to see what suggestions are provided for the teacher.

The approach for this book is content-based learning with contextualized grammar. This textbook is designed with student-directed and task-oriented learning in mind. One of the goals of this book is to have students develop independent learning skills, and the teacher should act as the facilitator. The structure of each unit goes through the following five steps: 1. Introduction 2. Presentation 3. Awareness 4. Systematization 5. Application. In the introduction, students brainstorm their knowledge and vocabulary about each specific topic and also learn new expressions and words, usually by discussing an image. The presentation stage is when the students are exposed to the main content of the chapter, which is usually presented through a text such as a newspaper article, an excerpt from a primary source, a poem, film clip, artwork, or material from the internet. In the awareness section, students are expected to collect data and gain awareness about a specific fact or problem concerning the culture or linguistic features or both. This stage is where the task-oriented activities are used. After the awareness stage the students will systematize their findings by creating and using visual diagrams. Lastly, in the application stage the students will apply the acquired linguistic forms from the chapter in accordance with the culture insights they have gained from the chapter. This knowledge is displayed through the use of role plays, debates, writing activities, and projects.

This book has been updated from the second addition, and there have been some significant revisions. Some units in the book have been re-sequenced. There is a completely new unit on political movements. The workbook has been reorganized and streamlined so that all three sections of each unit (writing activities, listening activities and grammar explanation) are grouped together in order to be better aligned with the textbook.

To better evaluate the tasks in this book it is important to know how a task is defined. I am working with Van den Branden's definition of a task, which is "an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective and which necessitates the use of language" (2004, p. 4). The majority of the tasks in this book are structured around communication and meaning, which Willis (2001) considered an appropriate task; however, there are also activities in the textbook with a grammar focus in mind. Does this mean that these activities cannot be considered tasks? According to Willis (2001) the answer would be no, however, according to other researchers such as Nunan (2004) and Long and Norris (2000), tasks can have elements of focus on form and focus on meaning. Grammar explanation may also help carry out the task. There are many tasks throughout the textbook that have interactional authenticity (Ellis, 2003). The type of content in this textbook makes it difficult to have real world tasks because culture is a somewhat abstract concept. Because the content and culture are the primary focus, the tasks in the book are mostly based off of interactional authenticity.

### **Evaluative Summary**

This textbook has a lot of opportunities for task-based learning, and there are some additional activities in the workbook that could be easily modified to become tasks. As I have stated in the section above, the awareness stage of each unit is where the task-oriented learning is intended. Sequentially, this makes sense because the preceding two stages can be grouped as pre-task time where the students are exposed to the necessary vocabulary and linguistic forms as well

as the content information to aid them in completing the tasks. Although the five stages of the units are clearly marked in the preface, these five stages are not as explicitly marked throughout the textbook, which means that the teacher must be conscious about which stage is happening during each unit. A key aspect of TBLT is providing a challenge for students to work through. For a pedagogical task information gaps could be more prevalent. Many of the activities in this book could become more task-like if the gaps were more prevalent. There are some tasks with information gaps in the text book. For example, in unit 7, one group of students watches a short film clip about a film that is related to the topic of the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion), and the students who did not watch the film clip have to guess what was shown in the film clip. Then the other student who did see the film clip compares his or her view with the other student's assumptions to re-evaluate what they actually saw.

There are fill-in-the-blank, sentence completion, and matching activities in each unit which may not qualify as tasks independently, but they could be considered pre-task activities to prepare the students for the main task, which is generally a writing task or a presentation. For future editions of this book, it would be very beneficial to have the five stages clearly labeled in each unit to guide the instructor towards the main tasks. One of the most prominent tasks/pre-task in each unit is discussing images. This could easily be modified into having the students not only describe the image, but also write a short story related to the image. Although this textbook has been designed to promote task-oriented learning, this book falls under the scope of lower-case tblt and not TBLT, meaning that the tasks in the book are not central (they are more peripheral) and they do not guide the lessons. The tasks in this book are primarily pedagogical tasks, and the overarching focus is on language structures and form learning.

## **Conclusion**

*Anders Gedacht* is an innovative textbook in the field of German studies and provides a cultural discourse that not many other textbooks have; the inclusion of Austrian and Swiss culture is not common in many German textbooks on the market in the United States, and if it is, then the information is usually surface level and is dwarfed by the amount of focus on German culture. The activities provided in the book and workbook lend themselves to tblt. The sequencing of the units is well thought out and provides necessary scaffolding to complete writing and speaking tasks that occur later on in the units. This is a task-oriented, content based textbook with culturally authentic materials intended to promote and develop students' critical thinking skills and independent learning skills, which makes this textbook innovative, but teachers who are interested in a task-based language classroom may have to supplement some of the materials and activities in the book to transform them into more real world type of tasks.

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