



## **Incorporating Critical Thinking and Authenticity into Business German Testing**

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*The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 82, No. 1. (Spring, 1998), pp. 19-32.

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# Incorporating Critical Thinking and Authenticity into Business German Testing

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For some time, foreign language proficiency theoreticians and practitioners as well as executives in international business have identified critical thinking as an essential skill. Despite this demand, the leading world-wide examinations for assessing oral and written communicative competence in Business German, the *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International* [International Business German Examination] (PWD) and the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* [German Certificate for Professional Purposes] (ZDfB), test only students' information retrieval skills and fail to assess their critical thinking abilities. This article proposes to integrate critical thinking and problem solving into the exams and to contextualize the tests' tasks in a more authentic business setting without compromising the PWD's and ZDfB's content. These proposals should then be researched using qualitative as well as statistical methods in order to develop a stronger test. For each component of these exams, this article offers ways to include an assessment of the students' ability to reflect on, analyze, and critically evaluate business information. Parallels are drawn to the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Given the enormous influence of the PWD and the ZDfB on Business German curricula worldwide, these improvements will contribute to a more realistic preparation of Business German learners for their successful participation in the global marketplace.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Fifteen years ago the hue and cry in education was 'Johnny can't read,' and leaders in education, government and business across the country grappled with ways to remedy the problem. Today, in education circles, the word is 'Johnny can't think,' and many of those same folks are demanding education reforms to develop the thinking skills Johnny and Jane will need to succeed in the 21st Century" (Leopold, 1990, p. 6). By no means a recent phenomenon, the sentiments expressed in this quotation have appeared in numerous newspaper articles, in business training programs,

and at management-level seminars since the 1980s. The business community in particular has considered critical thinking a vital skill sorely needed in today's economic climate. Most of the business leaders recently polled by the Bayer Corporation, for example, stated that "students seeking to enter the work force today lack the skills, judgment and critical thinking to become successful employees" ("Founders of tech firms," 1996, p. A4). Andersen Consulting in Canada, to furnish another example, even tests for critical thinking abilities in their job interviews (Alavi, Wheeler, & Valacich, 1995). This demand for critical thinking in the business world is also true for Germany. In a statement typical of many German executives, Gerd Foecking, Director of the worker training program at the German shipping company IDS, recently declared that what is needed is "not only to 'know how to,' but above all else to

'know why'" ("Interne Weiterbildung," 1996, translated by the authors).<sup>1</sup>

Most definitions of critical thinking include an element of reflection, creativity, interpretation, analysis, or problem solving. In this article, we use Ennis' (1987) definition of critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 10). Critical thinking goes beyond the human mind's effort simply to understand information; a critical thinker also creates his or her own ideas about a given topic or solutions to the problem at hand. This skill is particularly crucial in business settings where data is gathered in order to make informed decisions.

With critical thinking in such great demand both in the American and German business world, it is surprising that the leading international examination for advanced Business German, the *Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International* (PWD), does not assess test takers' critical thinking skills. We argue that the PWD assesses oral and written communicative competence in Business German, but does not test the candidates' ability to read, write, and use Business German *critically*. In addition, the PWD does not consist of authentic, contextualized tasks typically found in international business environments. The new international Business German exam for intermediate proficiency, the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* (ZDfB), only requires critical thinking in one part in the oral section of the exam, and its tasks, although more contextualized than those on the PWD, often lack specific guidelines needed to characterize clearly each business setting.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we propose two elementary improvements: (a) a modification of test tasks to reflect greater authenticity and contextualization, and (b) an integration of critical thinking and problem solving into the tasks of all the tests.

Developed by the Goethe Institute, the Carl Duisberg Centers, and the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the PWD (Goethe-Institut, 1990) evolved from the *Diplom Wirtschaftsdeutsch für die USA* [Diploma Business German for the USA] (Goethe-Institut, 1984), which was administered for the first time in 1984. In its current format, the PWD was offered to candidates worldwide for the first time on May 1, 1987, when approximately 200 nonnative speakers of German were tested.<sup>3</sup> The largest pool of test takers came from France (540 participants in 1995) and the U.S. and Canada (205 participants in 1995). In North America, the PWD is administered by the American Association of Teachers of German through testing cen-

ters at the Goethe Institutes and approximately 20 designated universities. Between 1993 and 1995, 4424 candidates took the PWD worldwide. Table 1 offers more detailed figures.<sup>4</sup>

In May 1997, a new test for Business German, the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* (Goethe-Institut, 1996, 1995a; Schmitz & Stricker, 1996), was offered in North America for the first time.<sup>5</sup> The ZDfB was developed by the Goethe Institute in cooperation with the national German Continuing Education Council, *Deutscher Volkshochschulverband*. Both the PWD and ZDfB "are recommended for anyone embarking on a career in international business as well as for business executives and professionals seeking career advancement" (American Association of Teachers of German, 1997), but they are aimed at distinctly different levels of proficiency. Compared with the PWD, which is targeted for learners with 800 to 1000 hours of German plus intensive instruction in Business German and technical knowledge in the field of business and economics, the ZDfB is gauged for learners with 400 to 600 hours of German plus 100 to 120 hours of Business German. Not only do the exams evaluate two distinct proficiency levels of German, but they also require test takers to have different amounts of business knowledge. Candidates for the PWD "should have a solid command of specialized vocabulary in business and economics and must be able to function in complex communicative situations in business fields such as international trade, advertising, banking, management, business, and union organizations. Also required is a knowledge of economic geography, and retailing, distribution, energy, transportation, as well as other industries" (American Association of Teachers of German, 1997). The requirements for the ZDfB are lower. "Test participants should be able to function in business-related communicative situations, like social introductions, business travel, oral and written contact with customers, basic sales dialogues and basic business letters" (American Association of Teachers of German, 1997).<sup>6</sup>

TABLE 1  
Number of PWD Participants

	Germany	Outside Germany	Total
1993	21	1553	1574
1994	34	1321	1355
1995	93	1402	1495
Combined	148	4276	4424

Although the PWD is designed to test the skills of Business German learners in performing tasks frequently needed in business settings, the tasks are limited to information comprehension and retrieval. Typical exercises are summaries of written and oral texts without analysis of point of view, vocabulary tasks devoid of context, and letter writing without awareness of register. Candidates are not prompted to analyze the text for its dates of view, to analyze the content of written and oral discourse, to formulate an opinion, or to find a creative solution to a problem. The ZDfB fails to meet these criteria in most of its tasks as well. The modifications described in this article would bring the PWD and the ZDfB more in line with Bachman's (1990) postulation that "communicative language use involves a dynamic interaction between the situation, the language user, and the discourse, in which communication is something more than the simple transfer of information" (p. 4).

In addition, the PWD and ZDfB are two of the many tests that have grown out of the effort over the last 25 years in language testing to, as Bachman (1990) characterizes it, "somehow capture or recreate in language tests the essence of language use, to make our language tests 'authentic'" (p. 300). Of course, test authenticity is a desideratum that we can strive to approach, in particular through the use of authentic texts and tasks, yet by definition, testing situations can only simulate real life situations. In the case of the PWD, however, even the simulated real life situations in the oral part of the exam fall short of approximating authentic business settings. Test takers are never part of the interaction. Their role is restricted to listening to a taped business conversation twice and answering content questions without access to discourse practices available in real life interaction, such as steering the topic into a desired direction, posing questions about the business transaction, or requesting clarification in the case of miscommunication. The ZDfB, on the other hand, sets up the oral examination as a dyadic interaction in which both participants—the test taker as well as the tester—assume roles in a specified business context. However, the business context is not described in enough detail to allow test takers to understand effectively the role that they must assume. In effect, test takers are left on their own to select linguistic and pragmatic features of appropriate recipient design and register.

Testing's repercussions for teaching are evident. Tests have a significant influence on teaching and typically determine the teaching curriculum

as, for example, the oral proficiency movement has shown. Since the successful promotion of the Oral Proficiency Interview (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 1986), many foreign language teaching programs have made qualitative and quantitative changes in order to prepare students for the Oral Proficiency Interview by increasing the amount of oral skills development and by integrating more exercise types designed to practice conversational skills. Similarly, the PWD and the ZDfB have had a profound effect on the content and structure of Business German programs at universities and colleges, Goethe Institutes, and other teaching institutions, as well as at schools of continuing education throughout Germany as part of the *Deutscher Volkshochschulverband* [German Continuing Education Council]. Because of the PWD's and ZDfB's lack of emphasis on critical thinking or problem solving, however, Business German curricula do not stress the development of these skills. Therefore, one crucial way for critical thinking to play a central role in Business German programs is to modify these Business German exams so that they include tasks that require candidates to demonstrate more than just their understanding and production of Business German. In the following pages, we will outline how to modify these exams to better simulate actual business environments that a nonnative speaker of German would encounter.

These modifications also conform to the new *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* proposed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1996). For example, the goal that "students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures" (p. 52) corresponds to our proposal that students be required on the PWD and ZDfB to identify the particular register and stance in a written or spoken text. In addition, the standards calling for students to "understand and interpret written and spoken language" and to "exchange opinions" (pp. 38–39) correlate closely to our recommendation that the PWD and ZDfB systematically include tasks that require students to reflect critically on the business content. With the business community and the teaching profession aware of the need to think critically, we wish to propose ways in which these leading examinations can include these skills in order to be more in line with these real world needs.

This article restricts itself to outlining problematic areas of the test and to providing a basis for an international discussion of how the PWD

and ZDfB can be improved. It is not meant to disparage these important tests but rather to contribute to their improvement. We strongly support the goals of the PWD and the ZDfB,<sup>7</sup> but we feel that it is not sufficient that Business German students demonstrate only their proficiency in business terminology and practice; students should also be able to demonstrate a critical reflection of business practices and economic topics. The profession needs a revision of the PWD and the ZDfB based on a detailed study. Bachman (personal communication, July 13, 1996) suggests that a revised version of the PWD be administered to comparable groups of students, ideally under conditions allowing randomization, in order to yield test scores that can be analyzed statistically for differences in performance on specific test items. Bachman further proposes that the research design should include a qualitative part, such as think-aloud protocols, retrospective self-reports, and observations. In addition, the test tasks themselves should be examined in detail using task analysis and discourse analysis. We hope to spark a discussion that can lead subsequently to a research design based on Bachman's suggestions.

#### INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING IN BUSINESS GERMAN TESTING

In the main part of this article, we present the individual sections of the PWD and ZDfB in their current format and content and then suggest how the current tasks in the PWD and the ZDfB can be modified to assess systematically critical thinking skills in contextualized tasks simulating business settings.

Both tests have a written and an oral component. The PWD's written examination consists of four subsections: (a) business vocabulary, (b) reading comprehension, (c) summary of a German text in the test taker's native language, and (d) writing a German business letter (Goethe-Institut, 1990). Each of these four tasks is weighted equally in terms of time allotment (45 minutes per subtest) and grading (100 points each). In the oral section, the test taker is given a text in English and a list of four topics before the actual testing begins. The candidate has 30 minutes to read the English text and take notes in order to summarize the text in German during the oral examination. The candidate also selects one of four topics and prepares to discuss it. In addition, during the actual oral test, test takers listen twice to a tape-recorded role play simulating a business interaction in German with the goal of summarizing its content. The oral test itself takes

30 minutes. Students are graded on their speaking ability (20 points), correctness and appropriateness (30 points), content (40 points), and pronunciation and intonation (10 points).

The ZDfB's written test consists of four parts: (a) vocabulary and grammar (30 minutes; 20 points), (b) reading comprehension (40 minutes; 40 points), (c) listening comprehension (30 minutes; 50 points), and (d) basic business correspondence (60 minutes; 40 points) (Goethe-Institut, 1995b). In the oral part, test takers first have a 15-minute silent preparation phase during which they choose and prepare notes on one of two business-related graphics and one of two role play situations. Once the oral test begins, test takers have 20 minutes to introduce themselves and their company or affiliation. They then describe and evaluate the chosen graphic. In a final role play, the test taker discusses with the interviewer a particular business topic.

#### WRITTEN EXAMINATION — PWD

##### *Business Vocabulary*

In the first part of the PWD's written exam, business vocabulary is tested in a variety of ways, such as matching, selecting lexical items fitting under a given heading, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank exercises. A typical test item is shown in Figure 1.

Although not all tasks on the lexical part have this format, they all lack authenticity and many provide too little context. A similar task is found in a test preparation kit (Cothran & Karotki, 1994) in which learners are asked to identify the legal status (public, private, combinations) of different types of German banks. Figure 2 reproduces this exercise in original German (no English translation is provided because these terms are untranslatable).

Because even experienced Business German teachers in our program were unable to solve this task, we asked a former vice president of a major American bank in Frankfurt, who regularly used German in his professional interaction with clients, to solve this exercise.<sup>8</sup> He could not. If these names of different banks had been placed in a more natural context, information from the context in combination with his general knowledge about banks might have helped him distinguish among these banks. We also gave this question to a native German business student who had successfully completed an apprenticeship with a German bank.<sup>9</sup> He pointed out that in Germany it is uncommon to differentiate between "public"

FIGURE 1  
Sample Test Item — PWD

Bilden Sie Gegesatzpaare.		
<i>Beispiel:</i>	Einkauf	Verkauf
1	Gutschrift	_____
2	Einnahmen	_____
3	Gewinn	_____
4	Haben	_____
5	Einfuhr	_____

Provide antonyms.

<i>Example:</i>	purchase	sales
1	credit note	_____
2	sales/income/takings	_____
3	profit	_____
4	credit side	_____
5	import	_____

Note. Goethe-Institute, 1992, p. 22; translated by the authors.

FIGURE 2  
Sample Item from Test Preparation Kit

Zu den . . .	gehören z.B. . . .
1 <i>privaten</i> <i>Geschäftsbanken</i>	A <i>Raiffeisenbanken/Volks-</i> <i>banken</i>
2 <i>öffentlich-rechtlichen</i> <i>Instituten</i>	B <i>Sparkassen/Girozentralen</i>
3 <i>genossenschaftlichen</i> <i>Kreditinstituten</i>	C <i>Dresdner</i> <i>Bank/Commerzbank</i>
4 <i>öffentlich-rechtlichen</i> <i>Kreditinstituten</i>	D <i>Schiffsbanken/</i> <i>private Hypotheken-</i> <i>banken</i>
5 <i>privaten Banken</i>	E <i>öffentliche</i> <i>Bausparkassen/</i> <i>Postgiroämter</i>

  

1	2	3	4	5	6
	E				

Note. From Cothran & Karotki, 1994.

and “private” banks as is the case in the U.S. where there exists a relatively strict division between commercial banks on the one hand and investment banks on the other. For this reason, he did not deem this test item very meaningful or relevant. As for his results on the question, he answered all questions correctly, but for some questions (2 and 5) he found more than one answer appropriate. The answer key, however, does not account for such ambiguity.

We therefore propose that all future PWD examination kits be tested with nonnative speakers of German who interact professionally in the German business world. The PWD should also be

tested with native German business persons. In addition, an item analysis of each test question should be performed in order to detect “bad items,” that is, individual tasks on which all students perform poorly. The same procedure should be followed for the ZDfB.

A further problem with the lack of context is that test takers are prevented from reflecting critically on the lexicon’s subjective nature. Words rarely occur in isolation; rather, they exist within a specific context that determines their meaning. This perception is based on Wittgenstein’s (see, e.g., 1953) notion that meaning does not lie in an isolated word, but rather, is constructed through the social practices of its users. Consequently, one charge for pedagogues serious about critical thinking is to teach learners to understand the locally relevant meaning of a lexical item, sentence, and the larger discourse, and to change testing accordingly.

Given that words in the real world do not exist without a context, we suggest that this subsection of the PWD be eliminated<sup>10</sup> and that lexical exercises be added to the other subsections, in which candidates work with texts. A further argument for dropping entirely the lexical subsection from the test and for including lexical items in other parts of the test is that the results for the subset are not consistent with the results of all other parts of the test. In fact, the results on the lexical part are significantly lower. Table 2 shows the 1995 and 1996 PWD results in the U.S. broken down into skill areas.<sup>11</sup>

The results indicate that candidates perform much worse on the lexical part than on the other sections. This can be interpreted in two ways: Because one subpart is consistently lower than the

TABLE 2  
PWD Results for 1995 and 1996 in U.S. by Percent

Year	N	Lexicon	Reading	Text Summary	Business Letter	Average Written	Oral
1995	134	64.9	76.6	81.6	75.5	74.65	80.8
1996	186	60.2	78.3	85.6	76.1	75.05	80.0

others, it may measure something different from what the others measure; or the lexical part may not predict for overall performance as well as do the other subparts. To follow up on these hypotheses, statistical tests would have to be run, yet the necessary raw data are not easily available. Nonetheless, we feel that the provided mean scores show a clear trend.

### *Reading Comprehension*

The goal of the second subsection of the written part of the PWD is to test reading comprehension. Candidates receive an authentic text with a business or economic topic in the target language, usually selected from the business section of a leading German newspaper or from other German business publications. Topics range from "Die deutsche Automobilindustrie auf dem Weltmarkt" [The German automobile industry in the world market] (Goethe-Institut, 1990) to "Der Teppichabsatz bleibt in diesem Jahr voraussichtlich stabil" [The sales of rugs is likely to remain stable this year] (Deutscher Industrie- und Handelstag, Goethe Institute, & Carl Duisberg Centers, 1995). Test takers complete exercises to demonstrate their global as well as local understanding of the text's content. For example, candidates select an appropriate heading for the four paragraphs of the text from a list of seven possible headings. Another exercise format asks test takers to provide brief answers to questions about the text. In other exercises, candidates fill out a partially completed table with pieces of information from the text. Occasionally, a multiple-choice test is also included.

This part of the PWD would be an appropriate place to insert a critical thinking exercise by adding a task that requires reflection on the text's content. Although we agree that it is essential for candidates to demonstrate the ability to understand a German newspaper article with business and economic content, the PWD ignores the reason why American business persons read German newspapers; that is, the content is of interest or of particular relevance to their own situation, to the company they work in, or to the field they study. In addition, newspaper articles convey to varying degrees of explicitness not only informa-

tion but also opinions, prognoses, and arguments. For this reason, it is crucial that American readers of German-speaking newspapers develop an awareness of the linguistic and discourse features used for affect, stance, and manipulation.

For example, in the newspaper article on the German automobile industry used as a test preparation set, the subheading already expresses an opinion "Freier Zugang für jeden zu allen Märkten der Welt—dafür plädiert die deutsche Automobilindustrie" [Free access for everyone to all markets of the world—this is what the German automobile industry pleads for] (Goethe-Institut, 1990). The reading comprehension questions for this text, however, are restricted to the mere extraction of facts—identifying appropriate headlines, naming the countries with certain influences on this market, providing statistics from the text for selected contents, and marking the most important presuppositions for a worldwide automobile industry from a list of four possible answers.

We propose that additional questions be designed to target a more critical evaluation of the text. The following questions would promote a more critical reading of the text mentioned: Who do you think is the author of the article? What is his job title? How is he connected to the topic of the article? Where in the text does the author state his opinion concerning a free world market for the German automobile industry? What is his opinion? How does the author support this opinion? What aspects of the auto industry does the author not mention?

As suggested in our discussion of the lexical subsection of the PWD, this reading comprehension task could also include questions that ask candidates to identify lexical and discourse features used in the text that convey an opinion or guide the reader into a certain direction of thinking. In addition, candidates could be asked to write a paragraph about their own position concerning the goal of the German automobile industry and arguments supporting their own view.

### *Text Summary in the Native Language*

Similar to the previous subsection, test takers in the third part of the exam read a German

newspaper article with business or economic content. However, the task now is to write a summary in one's native language, that is, for American candidates, English. In most cases, the instructions include a list of aspects to address in the summary, yet students are not asked to reflect critically on the article in any way. In fact, the term "summary" implies an objective retelling of the passage's key information, without interpretation. Such a task runs counter to the natural tendency in most learners. As a result, in our PWD preparation class, we have to teach students explicitly that their own view of the topic is *verboten* in the test and penalized in grading.

In this year's PWD administered at the University of Texas at Austin, for example, one test participant, a technical writer with 3 years of recent work experience in Germany who had not participated in our preparation course, adequately summarized a text about Helmut Kohl's proposed subsidy cuts for the German coal mining industry. He did, however, frame his summary and discuss the content by placing it in the context of the particular newspaper in which it appeared, by comparing his own viewpoint with that of the author, and by including an analysis of the text's subjectivity. All this was done in flawless German. Although according to PWD guidelines this candidate had not adequately performed this task, the test graders were very impressed and unanimously agreed that this test taker had exhibited a much more advanced and sophisticated understanding of the article than the test task asked for, and his treatment of the text was very relevant for a realistic business setting.

Due to such flaws in the test, we propose to shorten the summary and to give candidates more room to respond to the passage so that they do more than simply retrieve the key information from the text. This part of the test would then have two tasks, (a) a "gist" summary and (b) a critical reflection on an aspect of the text's content. To assure that more than information intake and recovery take place, the criteria used for grading this subsection could be changed to include not just categories for content and language, but also one for personal reflection.

Given that the PWD uses newspaper articles in both the reading comprehension section and the text summary, we call for a greater variety of text genres, such as company presentations, brochures, internal publications, graphics, reports, forms, and documents.

### *Business Letter Writing*

As the final part of the written test, the examinees read a case description of a business situation to which they have to react with an appropriate business letter. This task requires that language learners understand the case description, know the format of a German business letter, and are able to draft a letter with the necessary content and structure. It is inherent in this exercise that test takers are familiar with the different styles, registers, and formats of business letters in the home and target country. One problematic feature of this task is that the case description is frequently lengthy and intricate and thus writing the letter requires a great deal of reading comprehension of the instructions.

In light of this criticism, we suggest a two-part section on business letters. A more natural business letter writing context would be to give candidates an actual letter from another business or an internal company memo to which they would respond. In the first part of the section, test takers could be asked to read, analyze, and evaluate the letter with the help of guided questions, including ones dealing with the epistemic stance of the writer. Subsequently, candidates could compose a response letter by following a basic instruction, such as "Write a response. Your letter should have a friendly (annoyed/firm/impatient) tone." Another idea is to ask candidates to compose two different responses to the same letter, one with an agreeable stance and one with a disagreeable one. In this way, test takers would simulate a more real life situation while they are asked to display the necessary receptive and productive skills for business letter writing.

A further suggestion for this section of the PWD is to include a wider variety of text forms used in written correspondence, such as memos, emails, or faxes. Along this line of thought, the task could then be for the candidate to respond to a business letter using two different genres, such as a formal letter and an email.

To conclude our discussion of the written part of the PWD, the following modifications in format and task design are advised. The 3-hour examination with four parts at 45 minutes each should be replaced with three parts at 60 minutes each. We suggest taking a more integrated approach by eliminating the lexical subsection and adding more contextualized lexical tasks to the other three parts of the written test. All three parts should include new items that assess the test takers' critical involvement both in comprehension and production of business discourse. Fi-

nally, we recommend a greater variety of text genres.

## WRITTEN EXAMINATION — ZDFB

### *Vocabulary and Grammar*

In the first part of the ZDFB exam, vocabulary and grammar are tested in three different tasks. The first task consists of a brief reading text of about 200 words in which selected words are deleted. For each blank, test takers must choose the correct lexical item from a list of three. The following example is one sentence from a reading passage about the German company Dr. August Oetker (Goethe-Institut, 1995a, p. 4, translated by the authors):

*Im Jahre 1891 entwickelte ein junger Bielefelder Apotheker das Backpulver Backin—und erkannte auch gleich eine \_\_\_\_\_.*

*a. Marktanalyse b. Marktlücke c. Marktstudie*

*In 1891 a young pharmacist from Bielefeld developed the baking powder Backin—and immediately recognized \_\_\_\_\_.*

*a. a market analysis b. an untapped market c. a market study*

The same cloze-test format is used to assess grammar. Candidates read a second text of about 200 words and for each blank choose the correct grammatical item from a list of three. The following is an example from a short article about trade fairs (Goethe-Institut, 1995a, p. 6, translated by the authors):

*Bei der Eröffnung hatte der Bundeskanzler es als "unsere erste gemeinsame Pflicht" bezeichnet, Arbeitsplätze \_\_\_\_\_.*

*a. geschaffen werden b. schaffen lassen c. zu schaffen*

*At the opening the federal chancellor declared it "our first common obligation" \_\_\_\_\_ jobs.*

*a. be created b. have created c. to create*

In the third task, test takers proofread and correct a business letter. Mistakes to be corrected are both lexical and grammatical.

This part of the ZDFB provides test takers with contextualized tasks and is thus a marked improvement over the lexical portion of the PWD. The fact that this section of the ZDFB contains three short tasks based on three different reading passages is advantageous for the students because they are now more likely to come across a topic with which they are familiar. Frequently, performance is influenced by the learner's prior knowledge of the text's content. Thus, a test with a wider variety of topics allows those test takers with the greatest breadth of knowledge to display

their competence more adequately. Although these features make the ZDFB both a more contextualized and a better indicator of test takers' abilities, the following propositions would allow for more authenticity and critical thinking. The reading texts simulate newspaper articles, yet no sources are provided. This seems to suggest that these texts were either authored for the purposes of this test or were adapted from original newspaper articles. This is an unnecessary approach given that there is no scarcity of short authentic reading texts in the business world, readings which would lend themselves nicely to this type of exam. For example, newspapers and magazines regularly feature brief reports (*Kurzmeldungen* in German language print media). The daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the leading national newspapers for business in Germany, opens its business section with *Auf einen Blick*, a summary of the most important financial statistics. The second page provides a summary of the most interesting news from German and foreign companies. Such short reports are canonical in all major business print media.<sup>12</sup> The types of reading texts should not, however, be limited to just newspaper or magazine articles; as was suggested for the PWD, the ZDFB should include a greater variety of text genres, such as product descriptions, company profiles, and the like.

The third task of this section, proofreading and correcting a business letter, contains a worthwhile and realistic exercise not found in the PWD. However, only the main body of the letter is included for this task. This is the case on both the practice materials (Schmitz & Stricker, 1996, pp. 22–24) and the sample test (Goethe-Institut, 1995a, p. 8). Because the format of business letters differs culturally in terms of the crucial information located before the initial salutation and after the closing signature, a complete authentic letter should be provided for test participants to proofread.

### *Reading Comprehension*

As in the vocabulary and grammar section of the ZDFB, the reading comprehension portion of this exam consists of three texts ranging in length from approximately 200 to 400 words. These texts appear to be newspaper articles from sources such as *Focus* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. However, they seem to be either adapted, shortened, or, as the absence of a source suggests, written for the exam. For each of these reading passages, test takers must complete content-based tasks, such as true-false questions, identification

of statistical information, and multiple-choice questions. Apart from choosing more authentic texts, the same suggestions for improvement proposed for the PWD earlier also apply to this section of the ZDfB; namely, there should be (a) a larger variety of text genres; (b) exercises focused on linguistic and discourse features used for affect, stance, and manipulation; and (c) tasks designed to target the candidates' critical evaluation of the text.

### *Listening Comprehension*

This section of the ZDfB is unique to this exam. We find it a worthwhile measure of candidates' proficiency in Business German. The first task consists of two listening passages involving the telephone. Candidates listen to a short voicemail message and fill out a telephone message memo. Then, test takers listen to a dyadic telephone communication in which they are not participants but rather note takers. The second task requires test participants to listen to a taped business interaction, such as a job interview, a customer complaint, or an interaction at a trade show booth. The accompanying exercise is a series of multiple-choice comprehension questions. For the final task, test takers listen to a radio broadcast and then answer true-false questions.

Although this section of the ZDfB tests important skills necessary for interaction in a business setting in the German-speaking world and uses several different genres, there is still room for improvement. First, none of these listening texts are authentic. While authentic voicemail messages and the telephone interactions can be difficult to obtain, they can be simulated better than they have been on this exam. For example, if scripted telephone interactions are used, they should always have complete opening and closing sequences. For the radio broadcast, there is no shortage of authentic radio programming that can be used for this exam. *Deutsche Welle Radio*, for instance, broadcasts 24 hours a day worldwide, and many American cities have local German radio shows.

Another recommendation for this portion of the ZDfB is to include questions that require test takers to evaluate critically the various listening passages. For example, test participants could be asked to evaluate the degree of urgency and the speakers' disposition in the voicemail message, the telephone communication, and the taped business interaction. The radio broadcast offers another possibility to examine test takers' ability to react critically to the text as we recommended

for the reading comprehension sections of both the PWD and ZDfB.

### *Business Correspondence*

Consisting of two tasks, this section also differs from the PWD. In the first task, test takers are presented with a letter to which they must respond based on a list of key information provided by a member of the firm that received the letter. Test takers then compose a response letter with the help of a list of 16 potential phrases common in business letters. This task is much better contextualized than the business letter writing exercise found in the PWD and even coincides with some of the recommendations that we made in our discussion of the PWD. At the same time, however, the letter and the guidelines for the response letter should be supplemented to include the position of the person who wrote the letter, the test takers' position when responding to the letter, and his or her relationship to the person who requests the response letter. With this additional information, test takers will be better able to simulate an authentic business letter writing situation.

The second task is much like the business writing exercise on the PWD although the instructions and demands are simplified. Test participants must compose a business letter of about 100 to 200 words based on a description of a business setting. Compared to the PWD, the case description is brief and easily accessible so that comprehending the directions no longer interferes with the letter writing exercise. As was suggested in our discussion of the business letter writing section of the PWD, this task can be ameliorated by including certain variables into the actual correspondence: the disposition of the writer, the register, and the type of text genre, such as email, fax, and internal memos.

### ORAL EXAMINATION — PWD

The oral examination is administrated by a committee of three testers consisting of two proctors accredited for the PWD (the committee chair and a German expert from the business world). Proctors for the PWD are accredited during a 2-day workshop usually organized by the Goethe Institute. Experts from the business world do not have to be accredited. Their participation serves as a "reality check" and adds an informal validation of the candidates' abilities in the business world.

In the 30-minute preparation phase, candi-

dates read both an English article to be summarized orally in German and a list with four topics from which they select one for the oral examination. After this preparation phase, a 30-minute oral performance phase begins, during which the three examiners guide the test taker through three different tasks. The first task is for candidates to introduce themselves. Candidates are also asked to talk about personal topics, such as their background in business and in German, their interest in Business German, or their career plans. Subsequently, candidates discuss their selected topic with the proctors. In the second task, a proctor prompts the candidates to summarize the English newspaper article in German and to answer content questions. As the final case-study task, test takers listen to a 2- to 3-minute tape-recorded business interaction scripted and role played by German speakers. When the tape is played for the second time, test takers are allowed to take notes. After listening twice, candidates are required to summarize orally the content of the interaction with the help of four to five guiding questions. In all phases, the proctors strive to engage the language learner in a verbal exchange with them.

In none of these three tasks are candidates required to interact within a simulated business setting. In the Guided Communication section they are asked to speak on a topic out of context and with no defined recipient. The test taker's and test proctors' default roles provide the interactional structure. Similarly, the Text Summary section fails to simulate an actual business setting in which, for example, the proficient German business person would summarize an English article for a native German business person with insufficient knowledge of English. During the taped interaction task, candidates have no chance to participate in the talk they hear. Whereas in real-life business interactions both participants can immediately signal to their interlocutors when there are any problems in comprehension so that the breakdown can be remedied as soon as it occurs (for American data, see Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; and for German, see Egbert, 1996), this task in the PWD leaves the candidate without any of the resources that are available in authentic interaction.

Moreover, in all three phases of the oral exam there is no discussion beyond the mere content of the topics presented. Candidates are not asked to reflect critically on the information provided, to state their own opinions, or to analyze the taped role play for epistemic stance. As was indicated in the discussion of the written section, candidates

focus only on information retrieval without any evaluation of the subjective presentation of that information.

To remedy these shortcomings, we suggest that the entire oral exam simulate one business setting and be designed to provide several tasks in which candidates can display the following skills and language abilities: (a) self-introduction, (b) presentation of facts, (c) comprehension of interactants' speech, (d) evaluation of facts, (e) argumentation, and (f) summary. This can be achieved by turning the oral exam into a 30-minute simulated business setting in which both testers and test takers assume a variety of roles from the business world.

According to this new format, during the silent preparation phase candidates would read the description of a business situation, a brief text with background information, and a description of the other roles to be represented by the proctors. Typically, such a situation would involve the candidate playing the role of an American business person in a German-speaking setting where all other interactants speak German. The input that test-takers receive is thus the written description of the business situation during the preparation phase and the spoken German by the other role players in the actual oral simulation. Of course, this requires the proctors to participate much more actively in the oral exam, but at the same time to be aware that the test taker must be drawn into the discussion. Because of this change in format, proctors would have to be trained differently in order to balance their role as proctor with their role as participant in the business interaction.

As an example, we devised the following scenario that, according to professionals in business whom we consulted, is typical for international business interactions:

Sie sind der amerikanischer Repräsentant einer internationalen Beraterfirma. Ihre Aufgabe besteht darin, in Dresden mit einem Beraterteam bestehend aus einem Deutschen, einer Schweizerin und einem Russen zu arbeiten, die Sie erstmalig auf einer anstehenden Konferenz treffen werden. Die Firma, die Sie vertreten, beabsichtigt, den Markt für Heimcomputer in Osteuropa zu erforschen. Untenstehend ist ein Text mit Hintergrundinformationen über das Thema, an welchem Sie und Ihr Team arbeitet. Als Mitarbeiter im Team werden Sie den Text inhaltlich zusammenfassen und die Relevanz zu dem Problem besprechen. Wenn Sie möchten, können Sie für Ihren Vortrag die beiliegende Overheadfolie mit Stift benutzen und einige Stichpunkte aufschreiben. Ihre anderen Mitarbeiter im Team werden andere Aspekte dieses Problems präsentieren. Sie haben nun

30 Minuten Zeit. Bereiten Sie sich darauf vor, sich kurz vorzustellen, lesen Sie den Text und erarbeiten Sie eine Textzusammenfassung und Ihre Empfehlungen bezogen auf den Text und fügen Sie weitere Informationen hinzu, die für das Projekt günstig sein könnten. Bitte stellen Sie Ihren Mitarbeitern Fragen, kritisieren Sie sie oder stimmen Sie mit Ihnen überein. In den letzten 5 Minuten wird das Team gemeinsam zu einer Empfehlung kommen.

*English translation:*

You are the American representative of an international business consulting firm. Your assignment is to work on a consulting team in Dresden with one German, one Swiss, and one Russian whom you will meet for the first time at your upcoming conference with them. The company you are representing wants to examine the market for home computers in Eastern Europe. Below is a text with background information on the topic that you and your team are working on. As a member of the team, you will summarize the text's content and discuss its relevance to the problem. If you wish, you may support your presentation by using the overhead transparency and pen provided to write down a few key words. Your other team members will present other aspects pertaining to the problem. You now have 30 minutes to prepare a brief introduction of yourself, to read the text, to prepare a summary and your recommendations based on the reading, and to add any other pertinent information that you might have for the benefit of the project. You are encouraged to ask questions about the other team players' contributions, to challenge them, or to concur with them. In the last 5 minutes, the team will make a joint recommendation.

An informal presentation of this scenario to several business persons active in German-American business indicated that they deemed such a scenario very realistic. More systematic observational studies of naturally occurring, cross-cultural interaction in the business world are needed to develop a greater variety of situations to be simulated in the PWD.

This new format of the oral exam would test skills that are addressed in the previous format, but now they are contextualized, and critical thinking is integrated into the testing situation. In addition, the new format would simulate a more realistic business environment that a non-native speaker of German might encounter. This new concept of scenarios also allows for the inclusion of a wider variety of text genres.

A further idea for changing the format is to involve two test takers in one oral exam, so that there is a simulated team of five business persons, namely three proctors and two test takers. The two test takers would be given two distinctly different roles to play and texts to read.

In addition to the current evaluation criteria of conversational ability (20%), linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (30%), content (40%), and pronunciation and intonation (10%), we suggest an additional criterion of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This new category should be weighted 20% of the total with 10% subtracted from linguistic accuracy and appropriateness and another 10% subtracted from content.

## ORAL EXAMINATION — ZDFB

The 20-minute oral examination of the ZDFB is administered by a committee of two testers, the designated test center head, and one accredited teacher. No representative from the business sector is required. This portion of the exam consists of three sections. In the first part, test takers are asked to introduce themselves and, if currently employed, their profession to the committee. For the second part, test participants describe and interpret a graphic about a particular economic topic, such as the environmental awareness of households in Western Europe or the international market share of the leading exporters of machinery (Goethe-Institut, 1995a, pp. 30–32). In addition to describing the basic facts presented in the graphic, test takers also are asked to compare the information with the situation in their home country. Although this task does require test takers to think on their own, it does not elicit a critical analysis of the graphic itself. As on the PWD, the information presented in the graphic is treated as objective fact when, in reality, it contains a great deal of subjectivity on which test takers could be asked to comment. In addition, the context in which test takers must present and discuss the graphic should be explicated in order to simulate more accurately an actual business setting.

In the last part of the oral test, the role play, both the test taker and the tester take on roles according to a business situation. This contrasts with the oral section of the PWD where the role of the tester is restricted to interviewing test takers. Instructions for one such role play of the ZDFB as outlined in the sample test item are presented in Figure 3.

Although including the tester in the role play increases authenticity and contextualization, the roles should be defined more specifically. For example, most introductions to the role plays define the coparticipants as either "Gesprächspartner" [conversational partner] or "Kollege/Kollegin" [colleague]. Thus, test takers are not required to consider linguistic and pragmatic

FIGURE 3

*Situation:*

*Ihr Unternehmen plant, alle Büroarbeitsplätze mit Computern auszustatten. Jeder Mitarbeiter soll seine Post (Briefe, Rechnungen usw.) selbst schreiben.*

*Aufgabe:*

*Sie diskutieren diesen Plan der Geschäftsführung mit einem Kollegen/einer Kollegin in Ihrem Betrieb. Überlegen Sie, welche Vorteile und Nachteile der Computer für die Arbeit der Mitarbeiter im Büro und für das Unternehmen bietet (Erleichterung der Schreibarbeit und der Abrechnungen, Zeitgewinn für andere Tätigkeiten, schneller Zugriff auf Informationen, Kostensenkung).*

*Beginnen Sie das Gespräch etwa so:*

*Also, ich finde das eigentlich ganz gut, was die da mit der Einführung von Computern planen. Ich hab' mir das schon immer gewünscht, weil . . .*

*Situation:*

*Your company is planning to equip all office spaces with computers. Each coworker should write his mail (letters, bills, etc.) himself.*

*Task:*

*You are discussing management's plan with a colleague in your company. Consider what advantages and disadvantages the computer offers the office worker and the company (facilitation of written work and billing, increased time for other activities, quick access of information, cost reduction). You could begin your discussion as follows:*

*Well, I actually think it's quite good what they're planning with the introduction of computers. I have always wished for that because . . .*

*Note.* From Goethe-Institut, 1995a, p. 33, translated by the authors.

features of recipient design. Whether the test taker's "colleague" is his or her secretary, professional equal, or direct superior will result in different behavior in presenting arguments and responding to the coparticipant.

This combination of tasks for the oral test of the ZDfB is much more authentic and contextualized than the PWD. Nevertheless, a recommendation similar to the one proposed for the PWD's oral section applies to the ZDfB's oral test as well. Namely, this entire oral section could be combined into one 20-minute simulated business scenario with one overarching topic. For instance, the test taker and the testers could be assigned roles that they would assume at the outset of the oral section. The initial introduction and the discussion of the graphic could then be included in this role play. The level of difficulty of such a role play would of course have to be adjusted for the ZDfB.

## CONCLUSION

We wish to recapitulate the core suggestions for improving the PWD and ZDfB in order to provide a basis for discussion in the field. The tests should be altered in terms of their structure, content, and tasks to include critical thinking and to increase authenticity. The improved PWD and ZDfB should then be subjected to a systematic study to analyze different groups of test takers' performance. In addition, more research on naturally occurring interaction and written texts used in German-American business settings are needed.

Based on the diagnosis that Johnny and Jane, as well as Birgit and Bernd, need to develop critical thinking skills if they want to be successful in international business, Business German tests and courses need to integrate critical thinking into the Business German curriculum. This article proposes that educators move beyond stating this need and begin systematically integrating critical thinking into testing and teaching. Our suggested modifications of the international exams for Business German provide an example of how critical thinking can be tested at the same time as content and skill areas of business vocabulary, reading comprehension, test summary, business correspondence, listening comprehension, and speaking. These amendments would make the PWD and the ZDfB more authentic in terms of both content and tasks. In addition, the amendments would bring the tests more in line with the new standards proposed by ACTFL for all language teaching. Because of an exam's ability to drive the curriculum, however, curricular changes often only take effect once the tests are revised. Modifying the PWD and the ZDfB therefore will not only affect test preparation courses but will also trickle down to influence entire Business German curricula. This, in turn, will expand the learning process to include a broader range of skills that will better prepare students for international business.

These recommendations need not be restricted to Business German instruction. As the ACTFL standards indicate, critical thinking and problem solving skills are needed in all areas of language learning. In fact, emphasizing in students the importance to evaluate critically the course content causes students to develop skills that have an application reaching even beyond the foreign language classroom. Developing such skills also corresponds to interdisciplinary, content-based, and Languages Across the Curriculum approaches that have long stressed the need to view language

as more than a subject to be learned. Students in a curriculum emphasizing critical thinking no longer focus solely on normed language usage or mere language comprehension; rather, they use the language to analyze situations, draw conclusions, and propose solutions to problems. In short, they are using language to think for themselves.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This article is written as part of a Business German Curriculum Development project at The University of Texas at Austin. For financial support, we wish to express our gratitude to the U.S. Department of Education; Sheldon Ekland-Olson, Dean of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin; the Goethe Institute, in particular Christine Meuer at the Goethe Institute Houston; and the Center for International Business and Education and Research (CIBER) at the University of Texas at Austin. We greatly appreciate Lyle Bachman's and Janet Swaffar's substantial comments.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For additional articles on the increased demand for critical thinking in business, see Barkley, 1991; Konsynski, 1994; Levine, 1992; Mattern, 1996; McLagan & Nel, 1995; Palmer, 1986; Pessah, 1994; Saslow, 1990; Schlick, 1992; Singer, 1991; Verespej, 1994; Warner, 1990; Zeiger, 1996. For discussions of critical thinking's importance in the German business world, see "Alles wird immer undurchsichtiger," 1996; Huebner, 1996; "Modellversuch," 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The ZDfB first appeared after we began work on this manuscript. We are grateful to one anonymous reviewer for recommending including this exam in our discussion.

<sup>3</sup> For a sample copy of the PWD and for more information write to the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), 112 Haddontowne Court #104, Cherry Hill, NJ 08034, or contact your local Goethe Institute.

<sup>4</sup> We wish to extend our sincere thanks to Konrad Wille and Heinrich Stricker at the Goethe Institute Headquarters in Munich for providing these figures.

<sup>5</sup> For a sample copy of the ZDfB and for more information write to the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), 112 Haddontowne Court #104, Cherry Hill, NJ 08034, or contact your local Goethe Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics on test results from the ZDfB were not yet available at press time.

<sup>7</sup> The University of Texas at Austin is one of the official examination sites for the PWD and ZDfB with an eight-course Business German Program.

<sup>8</sup> Perry Myers, former vice president for ETP (Exchange Traded Product), at J. P. Morgan in Frankfurt, Germany, responsible for Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. We greatly appreciate Mr. Myers's help.

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to Andreas Roider, Department of Economics, University of Bonn, Germany for his thoughtful assistance and expertise.

<sup>10</sup> Should there be strong resistance in the pedagogical community to this proposal, the lexical part of the PWD should exclude at least all test items that ask for lexical items without a context. It could include more contextualized tasks, such as short authentic texts, graphs, and flow charts that provide a minimum context for the production of business vocabulary.

<sup>11</sup> We gratefully acknowledge the generous help of Dagmar Schneeloch and Helene Zimmer-Loew at the American Association of Teachers of German for providing us with these figures.

<sup>12</sup> We recommend *Wirtschaft—aus der Zeitung* by Werner Schmitz and Ingola Martelly, 1993, for helpful guidelines on and examples of how to prepare a variety of newspaper texts for teaching Business German.

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