

## **FROM SHORT STORY TO RADIO PLAY: AN INTER-GENRE EXPERIMENT USING THE TAPE RECORDER**

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### *Background*

When three students found that they were unable to enroll in third-semester German because of a schedule conflict, I accepted them under our independent-study option. The regularly scheduled class meets four hours per week at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, but the three students and I were able to find only one and a half hours per week when we could come together. To compensate for the reduced number of contact hours, I sought a group project designed to increase the students' aural-oral skills. This project was to be an adjunct to the textbook material. The students were expected to do a great deal of work outside of class, but on the textbook material and on the special project. I felt that the few hours we had together would have to be spent examining their progress in the two assignments. We planned to concentrate on the textbook early in the semester so that by the twelfth week we would be devoting full time to the project.

### *The Project*

We decided to read Wolfgang Borchert's short story *Das Brot*, rewrite it as a radio play and record our results on tape. After only two semesters of German, the students' knowledge of the language was limited, but we did not intend to produce a recording of professional quality. Although Roland F. Lukner suggests that it is not feasible to record a radio play before the third year of German study, we felt that this suggestion was not valid in our case.<sup>1</sup> Ours was to be a learning experience and nothing more; we did not plan to preserve our recorded tape for use by other students.

We found several reasons for choosing *Das Brot*. It has only two characters (our third student became the narrator), the story line is straightforward, the syntax is simple and the vocabulary is basic. The students would be able to read it with relative ease while maintaining their interest in it. The story contains some direct speech, but more could be created to suit our purposes. Perhaps as important as any of the above reasons is that *Das Brot*, a story of the hunger in post-war

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Germany, stirred the students' interest. Although the story was written before any of the students were born, they were able to identify with it, and they found it as modern as the evening news. Certainly any number of short stories could be adapted as radio plays, but *Das Brot* seemed to fill our need.

We considered but rejected the idea of converting the story into a stage play. A drama would have involved a certain amount of costuming, staging and memorizing which we did not feel ready to undertake. An advantage of a radio play is that the students have the script before them although most will have memorized their lines by the end of the project. With the script always at hand, they are able to devote more time to achieving correct intonation, emphasis and oral characterization. Because several tapings are necessary, the students are able to listen critically to their own voices and to make improvements in succeeding recordings. A short story could be adapted as a puppet play, but we decided that the material in Borchert's *Das Brot* would lend itself more readily to a radio play.<sup>2</sup>

### Technique

After the students had read the story thoroughly, we devoted class time to discussing the work. This encouraged the students to formulate ideas in German and to project themselves into the characters and mood of the story.<sup>3</sup> We discussed the geographical and temporal setting of the story, the age and economic level of the characters and their relationship to each other. Students were urged to decide whether they felt more sympathy toward one character or the other, and if so, what led to this feeling. Questions such as the following encouraged a lively discussion which led to a deeper understanding of the work: "Was the man justified in eating the bread?" "Why didn't he tell the truth?" "Would you have acted differently if you were the wife? the husband?" "Do the characters love each other?" "How can you tell," "Do you see the characters as real people, or are they only 'types'." All of our discussion was in German.

In succeeding meetings we considered two literary genres, the short story and the radio play, and the feasibility of converting a work from one to the other. This led to a brief examination of Borchert's involvement in the two genres and to discussions of the importance of those genres to twentieth-century German literature. We then turned to the mechanics of our project, deciding which parts of the story could be recorded as dialog and which parts should be conveyed by the narrator or by the use of sound effects.

Finally the students were assigned the task of writing the script for the radio play. This was to be a joint project carried on at the home of one of the students with the instructor not present. When

they returned to class, we discovered that, in addition to making errors in grammar and style, they had been too conservative in their use of dialog, relying heavily on Borchert's own use of direct speech. We discussed the purpose of the radio play with its need for extensive dialog, and they were convinced that the script needed revision. After some rewriting, we were satisfied with the result and were ready to record.

For our taping we used a simple cassette recorder which is lightweight and easily transported to various locales for recording of sound effects. Better fidelity would have been achieved if we had used more sophisticated equipment such as that found in the language laboratory, but we would have lost the advantage of portability. Sound effects were accomplished by background music from a record player and by the simulation of sounds produced by dropping books, shuffling feet, rustling paper, slamming doors and the like. Taping took several sessions and numerous revisions. Our final product did not approach professional quality, but we had not expected it to. Rather, the students had been party to what they felt was a unique learning experience.

#### *Advantages of the Experiment*

The experiment was successful. The students improved their knowledge of basic German and added a dimension to their learning not usually possible at the beginning level. On an end-of-semester examination, their scores were comparable to those enrolled in the regular course. They were motivated by the project to study a great deal more than is usual for students in a beginning language class. The project excited them, and they gladly devoted time to it.

Extensive oral practice was possible, not only during the pre-taping discussions of the story, but during the taping as well. The students had to become aware of voice modulation, stress patterns and fluency in addition to pronunciation. By listening critically to their own voices and to voices of their classmates on tape, they were able to improve their oral expression markedly in succeeding taping sessions.

Aural comprehension was practiced more in our pre-taping discussions than during the actual taping when the script was available to each participant. Of the four usual language learning skills, the one which received the least emphasis was reading for comprehension. Because *Das Brot* is a very brief story, the students did not spend much time in reading it. But the lack of quantity of their reading was compensated somewhat by the carefulness with which they were forced to read it. A more advanced group of students could, of course, handle a longer short story.

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The class received extensive practice in writing, much of it in the form of directed composition with Borchert's original as a model. In their writing they had to be concerned not only about correct grammar, but also about maintaining the mood and style of the original work.

In addition to improving the four skills, reading, writing, speaking and aural comprehension, the students were able to gain some literary appreciation not normally possible in the third semester of instruction. They became familiar with two literary genres and made a start at literary analysis. They came to appreciate *Das Brot* as a work of art, not as something that had to be read by the next class meeting, and they gained a cultural awareness of Germans which had not occurred to them previously.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Roland F. Lukner, "Unser erster Horspielsessuch. Ein Beitsag zum Deutschunterricht mit dem Tonbandgerät," *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, 1, ii (1968), 32-35. Professor Lukner's project differs from mine in that his class recorded a work which has been written as a radio play.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of puppet-play production in the classroom, see Horst Jarka, "The Puppet as Teacher," *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, 7, ii (1974), 116-122. Professor Jarka lists some of the same advantages of puppet-play production which I found applicable to radio-play adaptation.

<sup>3</sup>For a useful interpretation of *Das Brot*, see Lucie B. Kressley, "The Invisible Bread: A Brief Interpretation of Wolfgang Borchert's *Das Brot*," *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, 2, ii (1969), 13-15.