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# The Language and Cultural Barriers for Immigrants and Foreigners in Germany

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Mellon Grant Research Report

**The Language and Cultural Barriers  
for Immigrants and Foreigners in Germany**

by Vinh Pham

## **Introduction**

As an international student and a relative of several first-generation immigrants in the United States, I understand the language barriers foreigners and immigrants have to face. Deeply interested in this topic, I was more than excited to receive the Mellon Foreign Language Grant to study this similar challenge for foreigners and immigrants in Germany. In four months, I traveled to Freiburg, Berlin, Stuttgart, Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, which was an extension from my original intention to visit only the first two. During my semester in Germany, I conducted interviews with a total of 46 individuals from different backgrounds. I met the participants in my daily life in Freiburg, through friends and mostly by visiting Asian restaurants. Besides German, I also used English, Chinese and Vietnamese in the interviews. Furthermore, I coordinated with professor Christian Anderson to categorize the interest groups of foreigners and immigrants into the following places of origin: Southwestern Europe (Turkey and Greece), Asia (Vietnam and China) and former Soviet bloc (Russia, Romania and Poland). The study showed that the Asian group generally confronted the most hardship in learning German due to the excessive dissimilarity between their native languages and German; respondents also remarked slow integration into the German life due to differences in culture. The Southwestern European group experienced some difficulties in learning German and the Turkish respondents underlined discrimination in a regular basis against the Turkish population in Germany. The Eastern European group, on the other hand, seemed to encounter the least hardship in learning German and had the most integrated life.

### **Asian immigrants and foreigners**

Vietnam was the most frequent place of origin of all participants I met. With 125,000 residents of Vietnamese origin, the Vietnamese is the biggest East Asian group of immigrants and foreigners in Germany (Wolf, 2007). The population scatters all across the country, mostly in metropolitan areas. Thanks to this, I mostly found no difficulty finding someone of Vietnamese origin in every town I went to. The easiest way was to go to Asian restaurants and markets that exist in almost every German city, all the which, including those specialized in Chinese, Japanese and Thai cuisines were run by Vietnamese people. Following the advice of my German friends, I visited Berlin and was amazed with the large number of Vietnamese people I got to interview. Dong Xuan, a huge Vietnamese shopping mall named after the central market in Hanoi, was filled with authentic Vietnamese goods, which was a really special treat for me.

The majority of Vietnamese people in my interview mentioned the GDR's migrant workers program in the 1980s called "Vertragsarbeiter", which was developed to boost the labor supply for East German industries and to provide aid to poorer countries of the communist bloc like Vietnam, Mozambique and Cuba. After their contracts expired, many of these workers chose to stay in Germany through different means and thereafter brought their family over for permanent settlement. Participants in the Turkish group also mentioned a similar guest workers program in West Germany. Many of the Vietnamese workers after obtaining long-term residency ended their jobs and opened exotic food restaurants.

Due to the differences between the two cultures, Vietnamese immigrants tend to stay in their exclusive community with everyone knowing each other pretty well. As the

immigration only started thirty years ago, Vietnamese residents were still new to the German society and their integration process has been quite slow. Moreover, thanks to the closeness of their community, many of the Vietnamese interviewees mentioned that they felt a special responsibility to help each other succeed and integrate.

When asked about the Germans, many Vietnamese respondents highlighted politeness as their first impression of their native neighbors. They mentioned that they didn't see an excessively welcoming attitude towards foreigners but also hadn't experienced any discrimination. The Vietnamese participants also revealed that their usage of the German language was limited to their business field, particularly restaurant services while they experienced hardship in using the language in other fields. Most of the Vietnamese immigrants I interviewed also mentioned their participation in part-time language classes, either provided by the German government or some private schools; many seemed to try their best to increase their language proficiency.

As Vietnamese is completely distant from German, learning German is a real challenge for these immigrants. Most of the interviewees commented that verb conjugation, a concept that doesn't exist in the Vietnamese language, was the biggest problem for beginners. The long word construction in German was also an obstacle in reading for not only the Vietnamese but also other research groups. Meanwhile, German pronunciation was in fact not too difficult for them once they got used to speaking the language in a regular basis: the reason they referred to was that German words were pronounced how they were written. For example, most of the German "a" as in *verstanden*, *Handy* or *Karte* are pronounced the same as /a:/, while in English the a's in *avocado*, *occupation* and *marry* are pronounced differently. The only mistake that some

Vietnamese might regularly encounter is with the German strong “s” as in *schneien* or *Stein* as all the strong s’s are softened in the Northern Vietnamese dialect. The difficulty level of learning German also depended on whether they had taken other languages. Some interviewees told me that learning German was much easier than Russian while some told me their preference of learning German to English as German had more to standard rules in pronunciation and writing.

There is also a fairly large amount of Asian students in German universities. I once attended a concert at the Freiburg Musikhochschule, three fourths of which was performed by Asian students. Unlike the Vietnamese immigrants, the Asian students I interviewed had all gone through advanced language training at a much younger age. As such, they didn't seem to experience as much hardship in using the language in a daily basis. A Chinese student told me that after three months of taking an advanced language course before he started his first semester in Germany, he could use German pretty fluently and had no problem attending college lectures. Asian students also seemed to adapt to the German life more easily than the Vietnamese immigrants - at a younger age, they are probably capable of acclimating more quickly to the new society while they also tend to familiarize with Western cultures more than the immigrants.

### **Southwestern European immigrants**

With roughly four million people of Turkish origin, Turks form the largest ethnic group in Germany (Haviland et al., 2010). The presence of Turkish immigrants was prevalent in everywhere in Germany I went to. The omnipresent döner kebab stands and restaurants were where I met most of the participants in this research group. Additionally, I was lucky to live in the same WG (student house) with two friends of Turkish and Greek origins, from whom I received a great deal of the research resources.

Many of the interviewees mentioned the *Gastarbeiterprogramm*, a 1960s migrant worker program in the FRG, which I found to be very similar to the one in East Germany that brought Vietnamese workers to Germany. It started with qualified Turkish workers, usually men, coming to work in German industries such as construction and engineering. After a long time, they got to bring their families and relatives over and expand the Turkish community.

Like the Vietnamese, the Turkish immigrants had difficulty learning the language at an older age. My friend's mother, who came to Germany to reunite with his dad, spoke only a little German even after 30 years in Germany – she managed adequate German only for daily errands while using more Turkish communicating with the family, friends and neighbors, all of whom were part of the Turkish community in Stuttgart. Meanwhile, my housemate mentioned that learning the language was not too challenging for younger Turkish learners. I was told that the only significant problem that Turkish immigrants might encounter involved the stress-timed combined pronunciation in German: many beginners would pronounce the word *Blaustein* as *buh-lau-shuh-tein* as in their syllable-timed mother tongue.

From the responses and my own observation, Turks in Germany tended to live a disintegrated life and stayed within their own community. The biggest reason could be their Islamic origin that greatly prevents them from integrating into the German life. Many interviewees also said that they felt discriminated and treated differently by Germans at times. As a result, the exclusivity of the Turkish community still remained significant and many viewed that they didn't need to integrate more.

A question of identity, especially for the second generation was also widely present in the responses. My Turkish roommate shared his feeling: "Many Germans consider me Turkish and ignore me from their society. But I was born in Germany and I spent my whole life here. So my relatives in Turkey in contrast think that I'm German and not part of them." Upon my question on what he considers himself, he replied: "I would say both, and why not?"

On the other hand, based on the limited information on Greek immigrants, I could predict that their integration is certainly not as tough as that of the Turks. My roommates also gave me a remark that after the early accession of Greece to the European Union, many Greeks moved back and forth frequently between Greece and Germany while Turks didn't have the same advantage and decided not to leave Germany to avoid losing their residency.

### **Former Soviet bloc immigrants and foreigners**

I spent a weekend with my friend's Polish family in Stuttgart and got to study many interesting factors of the life of Polish immigrants in Germany. I also had the opportunity to talk to people of Romanian and Russian origins in various places across Germany. They all mentioned to me that it's either them or their parents who fled to Germany during the control of the Communist governments in their home countries. Unlike the Turkish and Vietnamese guest workers who first intended to return to their home countries eventually, the Eastern European immigrants seemed to have defined their long-term settlement in Germany right at their arrival and tried their very best to learn the language and integrate into the German society as soon as they could. Respondents in this group seemed to experience the least hardship in the German learning the language compared to other groups. Native speakers of Russian and Polish mentioned the complexity of their native languages and considered learning German a fairly easy challenge for them. From what I saw, their integration process also seemed to flow much easier thanks to various similarities in the cultures. My friend of Polish origin also remarked that Poles, a predominantly Catholics group, were relatively satisfied with their settlement in South Germany where Roman Catholicism is also prevalent.

The situation of "no coming back" possibly made former Soviet Bloc immigrants integrate themselves into the German life even faster. Wolf's 2007 research also found a similar situation with the Vietnamese boatmen who came to Germany after the fall of the South Vietnamese government: they really tried to pick up the language and had a much faster integration process compared to that of the Vietnamese guest workers.

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### **Conclusion**

Thanks to the Mellon Grant, this foreign language research has broadened my understanding on various issues immigrants and foreigners face in Germany. I would be more than excited to study this topic in a more advanced level and will use this research as a premier resource for my German Studies coursework.

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