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Learning German: The significance of language in a multicultural graduate school

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The HOSST and TOSST transatlantic graduate schools were conceived and designed as multidisciplinary and multicultural training opportunities. While HOSST is headquartered at the GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research in Kiel, Germany, TOSST is run out of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada. English being the language of science, the main language of communication in both programs is English. For most HOSST- and TOSST students, however, English is not their native tongue, but a second or even third language.

Language is a fundamental aspect of any culture; in fact, they are intertwined and mutually influence each other. A culture can only be fully understood through its corresponding language, while interacting with a different language always also illuminates the respective culture. An integral part of the HOSST- and TOSST graduate schools is the requirement that each student spends a 4-month research exchange at the sister institution. For most TOSST students, this meant immersing themselves not only into the German culture but also the German language.

To ease the transition to working and living in Germany, TOSST offered their students a German course, a proposition that was requested by the students and unanimously supported by the TOSST leadership team. Thanks to longstanding relationships with the German community in Halifax, the TOSST German course was offered through the German Heritage Language School. It so happened that the teacher was also a TOSST student. Many students accepted the offer to immerse themselves into a new language and culture ahead of their research exchange. Obviously they did not reach fluency after one or two terms, but studying German prepared them to engage with residents in everyday situations and to better understand the local culture.

Beyond these practical applications, the students appreciated an opportunity for lifelong learning outside of their field of research. Both the students and the teacher found interacting with the German language as part of their work days to foster their creativity by providing a different stimulus than their usual research efforts. The German course further provided an opportunity to build and deepen friendships among TOSST students across cultures and disciplines. The learning not only provided theoretical knowledge of the German culture, but opened up access to the sizeable German community in Halifax. A handful of students even continued with the course after

their research exchange was completed as they appreciated studying the German language and culture as a skill that will serve them well beyond the TOSST graduate school.