

STATEMENT OF PROPOSED STUDY OR RESEARCH

NAME, Germany, Teaching English as a Foreign Language
English Teaching Assistantship

I propose to teach English as a foreign language in Germany, drawing on my own experience with learning German and studying in Germany. I will use my rural New England background to prompt students' desire to learn about all aspects of American culture. During the year abroad I will incorporate theater to teach English and build community, and I plan to investigate the acquisition of language and specifically how language shapes thought.

In an increasingly global world, one must be aware of how we face our neighbors and ourselves. In Germany I witnessed contradictory views of America. At times it was idolized for its pop culture and opportunities, at times dismissed as ignorant and uncultured. So many Germans were curious why I chose to study their language, and were surprised to hear of my rural, small town lifestyle. When I further saw their tendency to distance themselves from their own stereotypes, I realized the need to explore all aspects of a culture to understand it realistically. I represent a less understood rural component of our population: I grew up eating organic food in a XXX farm town, where even my dentist and town clerk knew I spent time abroad, and which protested the construction of a Wal-Mart. I cross-country ski behind my house and contradance with my friends. Teaching on a Fulbright, I would have the unique chance to shatter limited or unrealistic preconceptions of what it means to be American. Through reading and discussion I will investigate with my students the variety of our population. As a complement, I would further encourage them to reflect on how well they know their own country.

In Germany I participated in an international German-language theater group, which proved an amazing way to connect to people and loosen inhibitions. Acting forced me to improvise in German and forget my fears of sounding imperfect. Sharing time, creativity, humor, and a common goal is a universal recipe for creating community. At Colby I stage-managed and assistant-directed a student-run production, which involved leading and organizing others, incorporating contributions, and seeing the artistic and logistical sides of drama. Working intently with a piece in another language means repeatedly hearing expressions in that language and imbuing them with life and relevance, which leads to an increased familiarity with listening and speaking. I would bring these insights from my theatrical involvement in both countries to support English-language theater at the Gymnasium as an engaging tool to teach English and to connect with the student population.

Over the last few years, I have developed a driving fascination for connections across disciplines and how people form and represent their thoughts. As a student of two diverse fields of human knowledge, mathematics and German, I am aware of the extensive spectrum of the mind's ability to operate. As a teaching assistant for the XXX department at Colby, I read countless proofs, following and assessing the thread of a foreign mind's reasoning, finding the places to step in and avert a wrong turn. It demands that I lay bare my own logic if I expect it to be followed. Most of the students are new to the territory of abstract math and its symbolism, indeed a new language with its own expressions and peculiarities. I need to discern how much they really grasp, a

skill further honed in substitute teaching earlier this year, where I was always confronted with new students. When I tutor younger children, I realize that ideas which have been ingrained in me for years (how to round numbers or read silently for example), can be strange new concepts to them, and I often have to put myself in their position to find alternative methods of explanation. In the heat of last summer I tutored two high school students in math (not their inclination!), and found ways to turn potentially frustrating lessons into something playful. As a language assistant next year, I will apply the sensitivity and flexibility that these experiences sharpen. Effective teaching requires zest, which, for me, stems from my fascination with how people learn. It intrigues me to facilitate in transforming murky misunderstanding to clarity, and to determine what lead to that individual's transformation.

When you learn a language, you have to make the leap from constant translation in your head to *thinking* in the language. This phenomenon is something to which I have given considerable thought with respect to my own German ability. I have seen the effectiveness of immersion; when you can learn a language *using* the language itself (for example, defining new English vocabulary in terms of other English words), you have a better sense of the flavor of the language as a whole. During my six months abroad, I found ways to cultivate the art of thinking in German. Keeping a journal, making myself think informally in German, and having a regular conversation partner made me more comfortable using everyday language. Reading books for my own entertainment and watching movies in German reinforced the vocabulary and structures I was learning. Focusing enormous energy on learning German made me turn a curious and critical eye to English. Making comparisons between the two systems of expression clarified how both languages operate. I now have a keener understanding of the grammar and patterns of English, and I can more aptly disentangle the rules and subtleties as they relate to German. The techniques I have gathered from learning German I will carry on to students of English.

Reflecting on how I myself learned a second language has further sparked a deep desire to grasp how children acquire their native language and learn to use this astoundingly complex human invention effortlessly. I would love the opportunity to explore how children learn and use German and the extent to which the particular language influences the formation of students' thoughts. I would spend time outside of my assistantship working with small children in schools or daycare centers, where I could observe how they are taught to read and write. With my comfort in tutoring mathematics I could volunteer in math classes and compare how mathematical concepts are framed in German. Through observation and research, I would explore such questions as, does the finer precision of the German language shape more exact thoughts? Can the same notion really be translated from one language to another? Do supposedly universal languages such as logic and music truly not depend on linguistic background? Upon my return to America, I would like to pursue further research into some form of cognitive science and the representation and logical patterns of ideas. I intend to teach in this country and perhaps use my research to revise approaches to education. The chance to attain a higher degree of fluency in German, and to see first-hand how others use German to learn about the world, would open new horizons in my ability to understand the amazing human mind.