

Podcast - How to Hochschule VOICES



Show transcript

Hariharan Arevalagam & Brett Ellis

00:00:00: Hariharan Arevalagam: Welcome to How to Hochschule Voices, the latest series from the How to Hochschule team. In this monthly bonus feature to the main podcast, there are full-length interviews, individual stories, and a collection of conversations with people from Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, Kleve, Kamp-Lintfort, and the entire lower Rhine region.

00:00:29: Hariharan Arevalagam: In our second episode of Voices, it's me, Hari,, who you might remember from our How to German episode and what you can listen here is the complete interview with Brett Ellis, who is the deputy head of the Language Department at Hochschule Rhein-Waal. I talked to Brett about his experience as someone who also came to Germany from abroad, but became fluent in German and now works in the university's language department.

00:00:58: Hariharan Arevalagam: Hi Brett, welcome to the show.

00:01:00: Brett Ellis: Thank you. Um, glad to be here.

00:01:02: Hariharan Arevalagam: Great meeting you. Our first time meeting.

00:01:03: Brett Ellis: You too as well. Yeah, yeah.

00:01:05: Hariharan Arevalagam: Your official title?

00:01:06: Brett Ellis: Should I give the German one or the English one? Or both?

00:01:08: Hariharan Arevalagam: Oh, the English one or both. Yeah.

00:01:09: Brett Ellis: It's typically translated as the deputy head of the language department. In German it's Stellvertretende Leitung.

00:01:15: Brett Ellis: So we have a head of the department and I am her backup. So when she's not there I take over for her and when she is there I have a whole range of different other responsibilities mostly to do with language courses, but also to do with English language translations of official documents and marketing stuff for the university as well.

00:01:33: Hariharan Arevalagam: Could you tell me a bit about your background, like you are from the United States?

00:01:36: Brett Ellis: I'm born and raised in the United States. Monolingually too. Yeah, so just raised speaking English and I picked up German when I went to college. I went to Clemson University in South Carolina, liberal arts majors. I was majoring in sociology.

00:01:51: Brett Ellis: They had to do two years of languages as well as part of the general education requirements, and most people took Spanish, so I wanted to do something a little different, and I took German. And after two semesters, I think I realized I enjoyed German more than I enjoyed sociology. So I switched majors to German and I focused on German language and literature for the rest of my time there.

00:02:12: Brett Ellis: I ended up minoring in Russian as well. Picked up a love for that language as well. In 2006, 2007, I did a study abroad year in Ziegen. That's in the far end of North Rhine-Westphalia. So about the about four hours car ride from here, maybe thereabout. I, I spent all that time learning German, investing all my time in German.

00:02:33: Brett Ellis: I met a girl back then too, and we're still together. She's my wife now and since then I've been on and off in Germany for a few years and then since 2010 I moved here permanently.

00:02:43: Hariharan Arevalagam: Oh, so she's from Germany?

00:02:44: Brett Ellis: She's from Germany, yeah. And she was studying there as well. And we met there and we did a long distance relationship for a few years.

00:02:50: Brett Ellis: And then I managed to move back in 2010 to do a master's degree in Leipzig, the University of Leipzig in translation. And then after that I applied for a job here, in Kleve at the Hochschule Rhein-Waal, and uh, got that position.

00:03:05: Hariharan Arevalagam: And what exactly was it about German that made you fall in love with it?

00:03:09: Brett Ellis: That's a good question.

00:03:11: Brett Ellis: I think for one, the fact that the effort I was putting into the language was resulting in new communication abilities. I was able to hold conversations more and understand more. Start reading German texts and books and stuff like that, like very basic books, pop literature and stuff like that. But I thought it was very cool that I could read and understand and

00:03:34: Brett Ellis: I don't know. My, my thinking changed. It kind of reminds me of that movie a few years ago. I don't remember what it's called, where the aliens come and they need to communicate something to, to the world, and they have this language and then the people start learning this language and the language manipulates the way they perceive time.

00:03:52: Brett Ellis: That's also what I went through with German. Of course, not as extreme or science fictiony like that, but I started to just think and perceive things differently. Just subtle changes in the way I looked at the world just by learning German, and I thought that was a really cool effect and that was something I was feeling, and I wanted to just continue doing that, getting deeper into the language as much as I could.

00:04:11: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. Languages do construct our social worlds in a way, but could you gimme like, I don't know, like that's a really interesting point that you just said, like you changed the way you think and saw things. Could you gimme an example? Maybe?

00:04:23: Brett Ellis: Oh man. I don't know if it's just a general, maybe like a softening of perspectives.

00:04:28: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay.

00:04:28: Brett Ellis: Like, Maybe along the lines of Socrates where we said, or Socrates was the wisest man in Greece because he knew how much he didn't know. That kind of a thing.

00:04:39: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:04:39: Brett Ellis: And by exploring German and thus opening myself up to a completely different culture, it broke a lot of maybe preconceived notions I had. For one, especially as an American, you always grow up hearing this.

00:04:52: Brett Ellis: It's a country of immigrants and everyone wants to come here, and everyone wants to go there and set up a new life. I started learning German and learning more about Germany and German culture and German people and German history and stuff like that, and I thought, You know, there's a lot of people who are content with where they're staying and would like to, or don't have any interest in moving to the US or anything like that.

00:05:10: Brett Ellis: Something stuff like that. Little, like little breaks in maybe how I viewed the world and they just started seeping in. I've tried to nail it down in terms of like words, like certain words that maybe, and phrases and grammar and stuff like that, that, that maybe could pinpoint or more illuminate, like a specific change, but it's hard to really nail down.

00:05:35: Brett Ellis: I like to think that maybe like the German word efficiency, where you can put words together to make big, long words. Yeah, that kind of rubbed off on me in the way I speak and the way I think, but I really couldn't quantify that. It's more of just maybe like a fantasy that I'm imagining.

00:05:51: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay, so yeah, you've been living in Germany for 12 years now?

00:05:54: Brett Ellis: Yeah, on and off probably, yeah, 12 to 13 years, something like that.

00:05:59: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay. And what was it like coming to Germany for the very first time?

00:06:03: Brett Ellis: It was a bit of a shock. Okay. It wasn't as big of a shock as I thought it would be because it sounds silly. A lot of the weather and the trees and nature were similar to where I grew up in the US so it wasn't like I was like a completely exotic change of setting.

00:06:21: Brett Ellis: Of course there was a lot of differences. I remember when the one thing was...that I really recall is when I had all my luggage and I took the train, I took a little regional train to, to get to this very small train station, and the door opened and I was in the

back of the group of, in this staging or the loading area, and the door opened and no one got out.

00:06:43: Brett Ellis: And I was waiting for people to just make space for me to leave with all my luggage. And people just stared at me and then the doors closed and we went to the next station. I thought, oh, I guess I should probably say something or be more assertive or something. Stuff like that, like little cultural necessities that I had no idea about. Those

00:06:59: Brett Ellis: and, and of course the famous thing that students here deal with is the no stores open on Sunday.

00:07:05: Hariharan Arevalagam: Oh my God. Yeah.

00:07:05: Brett Ellis: So I got in on a Saturday and, um, my roommates said, oh, let's go. Let's go get something to eat. And I thought, okay, great, we'll go out and get a, go to a restaurant or something. And then we just went to the supermarket and I was like, I'm not prepared for this.

00:07:17: Brett Ellis: I dunno what to buy. And then I didn't even realize that I needed to buy for two days, so I just bought like a pizza for that day, and then the next day it was, I realized that everything's closed. So I had to. I don't know what I did. Probably went and got a Döner or something like that, but stuff like that. It was just, everything's open in the US. You haven't, you, you even have weird stuff like super Walmarts that are open 24 hours a day, so in 3:00 AM you can go get something if you want to.

00:07:42: Brett Ellis: Um, but that just didn't exist here at that time. And, you know, stuff like credit cards weren't even really that prevalent. So little things like that, little annoyances, but no real shocks or anything like that.

00:07:54: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay. No, that was a huge thing for me actually, because these, uh, the 24 hour establishments are super common where I'm from, so. Like I also had the same experience coming in Germany and I thought, yeah, okay. I arrived pretty late at night to Kleve, and Kleve was my first time in Germany and I thought, yeah, I'll just go get dinner once I'm there. But everything was closed, so my flatmate was nice enough to throw a pizza in the oven for me and said like, yeah, tomorrow I'll show you where the shops are and stuff like that. Like it was very uncomfortable.

00:08:20: Brett Ellis: Yeah. Without my roommates I would've been even, even in an even worse position, cuz when you get in after a transatlantic flight and train ride and or where at whatever, it's, you just think "I just wanna sit down and relax a little bit". Maybe have something to drink. You don't start thinking about your food planning.

00:08:35: Brett Ellis: But thanks to their goodwill and their help, I was able to survive, I guess. It wasn't that that serious, but it was, it was funny looking back because they don't prepare you for stuff like that. I mean, it's just these little cultural things that that Germans take for granted because it's just, it is the way it is.

00:08:51: Brett Ellis: That kind of a mentality. And then when you come out from a different culture and you realize it's done completely differently here, it's a bit of an adjustment. On the other hand, now I think, "oh great, Sundays. I don't have anything to do," and just relax. Yeah, enjoy. Go outside, do something. You adjust and you learn, and that's part of the reason why I've been able to live here so long, is that I stopped comparing what it was in the US. I don't know. Stop being envious of certain things that I miss and just focus on what I have here and accept the kind of the way things are and then make the best of it.

00:09:24: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay. Okay, but you do travel back to the US on and off for all.

00:09:27: Brett Ellis: Yeah, the pandemic of course, threw a monkey wrench in that whole thing, but yeah, I was back there in 2019 and it was, it was fun.

00:09:34: Brett Ellis: But it's, you know, once you live abroad for a while, it just, it just changes the way you think and the way you look at the world and the way you interact with other people. And it was hard to find common ground with people, with strangers or with acquaintances and stuff like that, and family, you know, you stay in contact with them all the time.

00:09:50: Brett Ellis: But yeah, it was hard to sit down and have a conversation about just mundane things with people because you just feel like you can't really relate as easily with people. I guess it goes both ways. It changes you for the better and it changes you in ways that make it more difficult to, I don't know, reintegrate, return just smoothly. Return to society or the culture you left, I guess? It's a strange phenomenon.

00:10:14: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah, no, a lot of people actually experience a life, like for me personally, I don't think I could live in Malaysia anymore. Like I went back during the pandemic and everything was just so weird for me. Like many things, which is so weird for me, the way people talk to each other, for example, over here, like people hug a lot as a greeting among friends.

00:10:31: Hariharan Arevalagam: We don't do that. We really don't do that. So like I did go in for a hug. I saw my friends and they were like, they pulled back a little bit. It's weird.

00:10:38: Brett Ellis: Really?

00:10:38: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. Yeah. Because we just don't do that. Like handshakes, that's it.

00:10:41: Brett Ellis: Yeah.

00:10:42: Hariharan Arevalagam: But how long did this whole thing take you? Like you said you no longer were envious of the things that you were attached to in the US, like how long did this whole process take you to really accept that this is the society you live in now and this is how it is from now on?

00:10:58: Brett Ellis: It's a good question.

00:10:59: Hariharan Arevalagam: It , it was not a voluntary thing.

00:11:01: Brett Ellis: Well, it was kind of a sink or swim type of thing. Um, because. I think it tied directly into home sickness. And then I would get pangs of home sickness and they would be, they would come in like small waves and they kept coming though whenever I would think, oh, I wish I had that, or I wish I could do that, or I wish I could have this experience the way I remember it, or something like that.

00:11:20: Brett Ellis: And I don't know, maybe it was like two years, maybe two and a half years, three or something like that where I just came to the realization that I need to focus on the things that I can enjoy and get here that I can't get back home in instead of always worrying about what I can't get from back home here.

00:11:40: Brett Ellis: Things have changed, thank goodness in the past 10 years, where I can get a lot of like food things. Like sauces, hot sauces, stuff like that, that I couldn't get in Germany years ago, or snacks and stuff like that. But for the most part, it seems silly, but I think of like a schnitzel in a beer garden or something like that.

00:11:57: Brett Ellis: Like something mundane that most Germans take for granted. And I just think it's just on a nice, sunny day with friends. To sit in a beer garden and then have a nice schnitzel with, with, with french fries or something like that, is something I couldn't do in the US. I, it is just, and it's an experience that if I moved back, I would probably miss.

00:12:16: Brett Ellis: So I focused on those types of things and just left my baggage from the US back home. Basically just the things that I missed. I just said goodbye to them, let go, and then, and then focused on the things I do have, because those are the things I can control.

00:12:30: Hariharan Arevalagam: You start to embrace Germany as your new home.

00:12:32: Brett Ellis: Yeah.

00:12:33: Hariharan Arevalagam: So to speak.

00:12:33: Brett Ellis: Yeah. And I think every, everyone who lives abroad for a while will have a healthy love-hate relationship with their country. I don't sing the praises of Germany, but I don't also badmouth it too much. There's things I, I really could do without here. There's things I, I like here.

00:12:49: Brett Ellis: There's things I enjoy here. And in the same thing with the US except the weird thing is that's all part of a world dialogue because the US is forced into the conversation so often. Um, so I think I've reached an equilibrium. And I think that maybe that's the right word for a lot of people too.

00:13:05: Brett Ellis: And a lot of the students who've studied here and done really well with their German that I've seen over the years have an equilibrium. They've found like a balance between where they are, who they are as a person, what Germany gives them, what Germany doesn't have for them, stuff like that. And then they find a certain peace in that.

00:13:22: Brett Ellis: And then if you can find that, you can have a stable foundation here. And that's what took me a while to find. Even though I had a connection through a girlfriend, it was still, it wasn't really a home away from home until I found like my own inner peace in, in those terms.

00:13:38: Hariharan Arevalagam: I guess that is the experience that I think everyone who is living in a foreign country will have at some point, or if they don't, they would just leave. I don't know. But if someone comes and lives in a foreign country for many years, I think they will all at some point reach that point that you just described.

00:13:56: Brett Ellis: I certainly hope so. Yeah. I felt like if I didn't, I would've been deeply unhappy.

00:13:59: Hariharan Arevalagam: Exactly.

00:14:00: Brett Ellis: And it would've just gotten worse.

00:14:02: Hariharan Arevalagam: Exactly.

00:14:02: Brett Ellis: So maybe it was a coping mechanism, maybe it was, it was just, maybe it's just a necessity. I don't know. I hope everybody can find that kind of a, um, Kind of a balance. It always, I'm always regretful when I hear or see students who say that they're deeply unhappy with where they are in Germany, and I think there's a lot of complaints that are valid, but I, I hope that they find a way to see the brighter side of things too.

00:14:26: Brett Ellis: Just for their own sake too, and for their own mental wellbeing and stuff like that. I guess depending on the context, I'll praise what Germany has to offer and or if. If I need to offer devil's advocate or be play a devil's advocate, I'll list a a long list of things where I think, oh, Germany, Ausländerbehörde, stuff like that, immigration office.

00:14:46: Brett Ellis: I've gone through the rigamaroo with that too, and it is what it is. You gotta take the good with the bad and then. I don't know. It sounds cliché, but keep your glass half full and not half empty. But I think part of the reason why I managed to, or I decided to stay long-term here is cuz I was able to find that balance sooner or later.

00:15:03: Brett Ellis: If I hadn't, I probably would've gone back, even if my, I, it would've been an uncertain career trajectory and I would've had to restart a lot of things because I'd done German schooling. It just, I wouldn't have been happy. And so I found a way to be happy here and that was the reason I think ultimately that I, I decided to stay.

00:15:21: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. I had a flatmate in my first semester here in 2017. Um, he was from India and uh, when he first got here he was very excited, of course, as we all are. And, uh, towards the end of the semester, he was a shadow of what he used to be.

00:15:35: Brett Ellis: Really?

00:15:36: Hariharan Arevalagam: He, yeah, he really just like being here, just broke him down so much and he said, yeah, I can't do this. And he left. He went back home. Never really heard from him again, but he really had trouble because he didn't know the language. It was one of the, one of the big things and I think not knowing the language and then going to the Ausländerbehörde where they just refuse to speak to you in English can have a lasting impact on you.

00:15:55: Hariharan Arevalagam: That's a very strong first impression, and I think a lot of people, um, immediately don't feel welcome anymore when they have that kind of experience in, in the foreign office, like the one place where you would expect them to be using English and they just refuse. I think it, it can be quite hurtful if people take it a bit personally and he did have one of those experiences. But you did come here already knowing German.

00:16:18: Brett Ellis: I came here knowing, I would say about, B1.2, maybe B2 German. Very low B2.

00:16:26: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay.

00:16:26: Brett Ellis: I had done a simulated semester abroad at Clemson in the summer. It was like four weeks. We stayed on campus, but we spoke only in German. It was like we, we signed a pledge. We will not speak any English, we will only speak German to each other.

00:16:38: Brett Ellis: And that kind of gave me a good boost to, I remember the first day and I had two years of German under my belt at that point. And that first day we sat down and did a full day of German. And afterwards I went up to my teachers and I said, I don't think I can do this. I under, I understood like 20% of what was being said here. I feel scared and I don't think I can manage that.

00:16:58: Brett Ellis: And they said, don't worry, just stick with it. And it got better and it got really better. And it was after that three weeks, I felt, holy moly, I can actually speak German and understand what people are saying. I can't do it very well and I can't do it at the highest of levels, but I don't feel out of my element anymore.

00:17:15: Brett Ellis: I feel like I'm, I can do this. I had that. I got, I was fortunate in that I got the worst and scariest part out of the way before I came to Germany, but I still recall the first party I went to. I was talking, you know, it was loud, and then we were having beers and I was talking to some German, German guy and I couldn't understand him.

00:17:34: Brett Ellis: I kept asking what he was saying. It was like, I, I, it took me a while to figure out his name, like Sebastian was his name. I thought, what? I don't understand it. What does that mean? Because I, I know it as Sebastian. So I just, the intonation was so strange to me and I sat there and we just, I just repeated it until I got it.

00:17:49: Brett Ellis: And so I wasn't ashamed to do stuff like that. And I felt, I think that gave me a big boost to my learning because I got that scariest, most uncomfortable part out of the way before I came to Germany. And that's really hard for students, for example, who have to experience that for the first time. It's a really scary experience.

00:18:06: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:18:07: Brett Ellis: I was fortunate in that I had a, a good solid basis when I came to Germany and that I could build on top of. And the flip side, I try to remind students whenever I get the chance and whenever it's appropriate that it's a unique opportunity to actually live in Germany and have immediate access to the language.

00:18:25: Brett Ellis: Cuz when I was studying in Clemson, I only had access through the courses. Outside of the courses. There was maybe like, there was maybe like a maybe handful of Germans or German speaking people in the entire area who I could talk with. We had like Stammtisch for example, like once every couple weeks where we would meet up and speak in German.

00:18:40: Brett Ellis: But, you could go outside right now to a store and talk with someone you know in German and you're not gonna have a, maybe a deep conversation, but you're gonna have an interaction that's going to benefit your language learning in a certain way. And I think that's a really cool opportunity. Even if it's just you go out and buy a magazine or something like that.

00:19:00: Brett Ellis: Like a Spiegel, like I would always buy a copy of, of a magazine when I came in through the airport, cuz that was like the first time I could get a German magazine. But stuff like that, I think it's a unique opportunity if that's, it goes back to what I was saying earlier with the glass half full kind of a thing.

00:19:14: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:19:15: Brett Ellis: You could sit there and think, oh, I, I can't speak German. No one wants to speak with me. And or you could just kind of bite the bullet and try to just put yourself out there, do it. Even if that's just through or something like that, through a sports activity or something. That would be, it's, you gotta look for the opportunities and you gotta continuously push up against your limits and keep testing your limits and keep trying to drive through plateaus.

00:19:39: Brett Ellis: And I was fortunate in that I had a couple years of preparation before I came here, but it was still, there were a lot of. There was a lot of experiences in university or privately where I was not prepared for anything. It was just, you just gotta kind of survive. You got, you do your best. You use your language skills as much as you can.

00:19:58: Brett Ellis: And then what I would do, I would go home and just replay it in my head again and again. What happened? Like I was accused of shoplifting once and just, I was, I went into a liquor store and I was looking around and looking at some bottles and I tried to leave and the guy who started yelling at me like, He said like, open your pockets.

00:20:15: Brett Ellis: I know you took something. I know you, you don't study that in, in, in language class. What, how do you defend yourself against false accusations? I managed to make it through that situation and open my pockets and, you know, he saw and there was nothing there, and he told me to leave and then I, but I kept replaying it in my head and thinking about the language I used and the language he said and what I could have said and stuff like that.

00:20:35: Brett Ellis: And I found just countless opportunities like that through living in Germany were very valuable, almost as valuable or maybe more valuable than sitting in a lesson and practicing grammar. It was just the real tangible experience kind of burned itself into my mind, and I, I never forgot like the language that came from that.

00:20:54: Brett Ellis: It was just, it was like, it was cemented in my head. And that's kind of a unique opportunity you have here, but it's, it comes at a price and it comes at the price of being very uncomfortable.

00:21:03: Hariharan Arevalagam: Okay.

00:21:03: Brett Ellis: And very upsetting in some situations. So you have to keep your composure and you have to swim through it.

00:21:08: Brett Ellis: And then on the other side, there is a reward there. And I don't mean you need to go out and you need to have like criminal encounters or something like that. I mean, just putting yourself out there in situations where you feel like out of your element, you feel out of your comfort zone. Um, that's a valuable tool and it's a tool that students here have immediate access to because they live actually in Germany.

00:21:29: Brett Ellis: So it's kind of like a double-edged sword. Come to Germany with no language skills, start to learn the language while you're here, but you also have this fast track if you're willing to take it and you're willing to put in the work for it.

00:21:40: Hariharan Arevalagam: And, and what I'm getting from this is also mindset is such a huge part of it. Because you said it like at least twice now that the glass is half full.

00:21:47: Brett Ellis: Yeah. It's a mindset. That's a great way of putting it. Yeah. That's a good way of summarizing. It's a mindset.

00:21:51: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah, and also like fear is a, fear is a powerful thing. And I think like how you deal with it at that moment can shape a lot of things in your life later on. Because I came to Germany with a B1. So I was studying German back home in Malaysia. I did a six months, six month intensive course. So we had classes like five days a week, and each session was three to four hours. And in the end of the six months I did the Goethe Zertifikat. Got an almost perfect score, actually.

00:22:17: Brett Ellis: Nice.

00:22:17: Hariharan Arevalagam: And then I came to Germany. Uh, my, was my first time in Europe, my first time outside Asia actually. And it was in Germany. And then on the first day it was like, I didn't feel that much like a fish outta water because I could understand what I was seeing in the train station and stuff like that.

00:22:32: Hariharan Arevalagam: And then I had like little conversations. There was this one lady who was begging for money and she came up to me and she asked for some money and I was like, I was happy to have a conversation. For some reason I was like, how much do you want? And then I wasn't exactly sure how things really worked here, so I gave her five euros and there was something that a lot of my friends said I really shouldn't have done.

00:22:49: Hariharan Arevalagam: But anyway, so that was that. I was really excited to be able to use the language and stuff like that. But then down the road I did start to have difficult conversations. Of course. Like I ended up in situations where I did not understand what the other person was saying. And I think the, a big difference between me and you was that I let my discomfort take over rather than see it as a challenge that I had to get through. Plus, being in Kleve is a very, it's a double-edged sword in the sense that, yeah, we get to study in English, but we have so many international students, so many of whom do not speak German, it's very easy to go about your life without having to use the language.

00:23:31: Hariharan Arevalagam: So in my WG it was very international. We had one German, and um, I did visit his family for Christmas and stuff like that. So I was still using German a little bit. And then at the end of that semester and I was always surrounded by internationals. There were hardly any internationals, uh, there were hardly any Germans in my course. Also, I did the science communication course.

00:23:53: Brett Ellis: Okay.

00:23:53: Hariharan Arevalagam: The ones who were there. Um, were more interested in improving their English because the course is in English and for me, it's basically my first language. So I didn't have the same challenges that they did, so we ended up speaking in English, and over time it just got worse and worse to the point where right now I definitely wouldn't say that I have a B1, although I officially do. I feel like, I don't know, maybe A2.2 or something like that.

00:24:16: Hariharan Arevalagam: I still struggle very much with conversations and that's the thing, right? Because I've been here for five years. And I've always been in a situation where I wouldn't need German. You don't really feel the sting so much until it's time to renew the visa and then you go to the Ausländerbehörde and then people just don't speak to you in English, which is funny. I once back when my German was still a bit better, I accompanied a friend of mine to the Ausländerbehörde, and I was his translator because the official translator went to the bathroom exactly when they called his name.

00:24:46: Brett Ellis: Okay.

00:24:48: Hariharan Arevalagam: So I was like, okay, I guess I have to do this. So we go in and everything worked out smoothly and there's this one moment where me and him, we just cracked a joke that had nothing to do with the situation and she laughed. So she understood enough to get the joke, but she still refused to speak English. So.

00:25:05: Brett Ellis: Well see. Yeah, there's a. I want to, I don't want to play devil's advocate. But I do wanna say there's a being working for a German organization and being here for so long that I would hesitate to say that people at the immigration office do that maliciously.

00:25:20: Brett Ellis: And it's more of a fear of saying something in a foreign language that doesn't jive with the rules and the law as it's written in German. So there's, there's phenomenon called Amtssprache .

00:25:33: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:25:34: Brett Ellis: So you've probably heard that before. For those who don't know what it means, the official language essentially, but it also means the language of doing business, the language of governance and stuff like that.

00:25:43: Brett Ellis: So everything is written, all the laws and the understanding, the explanations of the laws are written in German, so they are afraid. Maybe, maybe a little bit overblown afraid that if they say something in English, it won't, it won't fit the actual language of the law in German. They'll end up promising something or doing something or assuring something that is not legal in the sense that it aligns with German law.

00:26:10: Brett Ellis: So there's a certain reticence to speak in a non foreign language, not because they can't or because they don't want to. It's because they're kind of in a rock and a hard place.

00:26:21: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:26:21: Brett Ellis: Could they be nicer about it? Certainly. Could they maybe explain why that is? Most definitely. There's transparency and outreach are still kind of foreign concepts in a lot of German organizations.

00:26:33: Brett Ellis: Um, which I think is cool here because the international flavor and character of the university puts a lot of emphasis on that. So you get a lot of openness. People are gonna disagree with me on that, but I feel like as an organization there's a lot more openness and accessibility than in a lot of other German organizations.

00:26:52: Brett Ellis: But yeah, I would also say to you that languages are a muscle and you may have atrophied your German muscle a little bit. But if you. If you went into the gym and, you know, you had spent years building your muscles and, but you slacked off for six months, 10 months, whatever, if you went back into the gym, you would make gains pretty quickly again. It wouldn't be, I have to redo everything from the ground up. It would be more like I just have to give myself a boost and then I'm, I'll be close to where I was before. So that's the cool thing about languages is that even if you, it's like rusted and dusted over in the back of your mind. But if you've consciously focused on improving it, you would make huge strides and then get back to where you were pretty quickly.

00:27:31: Brett Ellis: But it is a mindset, and I don't want to sit here and claim that I have the mindset everyone needs to have. It's really an individual thing, and it depends on the conditions of where you live. And like you said, in a WG, a flat share with other non-native speakers of German, it's a difficult position to be in.

00:27:49: Brett Ellis: You could force yourself and others to simulate a native speaker flat share. How fun that would be, how successful you would be. That kind of open for debate, I guess. It would be kind of awkward, but you could start with maybe an hour a night or you could watch a German TV show together or something in German together, things like that.

00:28:08: Brett Ellis: There's steps you can take. You can test them. Maybe they work out, maybe they don't, but there's. It's, I guess it's you gotta, you gotta want it. That's the main thing and it's, it really depends on, on you as a person and the conditions you're in. And I can certainly appreciate students who are in groups, maybe like their same ethnocultural groups or that's a good support network to have, especially when you're so far away from home. I can understand Germans who don't want to just stand there and give you a language, like as a, they don't wanna be a language learning tool. They want, you know, friends and they want connections cuz they've lived here or in the region for their whole lives. And they've grown up here and it's people too. And I, it's easy to think, ah, I wish they would just teach me German or something like that. Or I wish I could just learn German from them. You gotta, it. It's a constant struggle, I guess, to find the right path. But if you have a mindset, like a learning and growth mindset, it gives you an orientation, it gives you a direction to follow, and you just have to keep at it. If there's one thing I could tell students before they get here, it's just that you can't learn a language by osmosis. Uh, you have to actively strive for it, and you have to, you have to want it, and you have to put the time into it. And if you want it and you put the time in it, it's there. You can take it. If you don't, that's okay. I know there's plenty of students who come here, speak English. You know, get their degree and leave.

00:29:28: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yep.

00:29:28: Brett Ellis: That's okay. No one's forcing you to learn German.

00:29:30: Brett Ellis: But I always tell students, no one ever said, oh, I wish I hadn't learned that language or something like that. It's a good thing and it's another, and it's another feather in your cap. Even if you do leave, say learn German for so and so many years. Even if, you know, end up at your, you're back in your home country, that's a valuable skill to have.

00:29:47: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yep.

00:29:48: Brett Ellis: It's an individual decision, but it's there for you if you want it. And it's about how you approach it. I think.

00:29:53: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. Now that's the thing, like we were never really told this in a sense that, because I remember back in high school where I was, uh, learning French and my teachers were saying like, yeah, if you, once you actually go to the country and you live there, you will automatically pick it up, which is really not the case.

00:30:08: Hariharan Arevalagam: Like you said, you have to want it, you have to go out there and actively get it. Yeah. So yeah, and that's really interesting. But the thing is, in my time here with conversations with students from all over the world, there tends to be this general mood of avoidance when it comes to all things German. To be like, they really go on with those like stereotypes about Germans being cold and things like that, which I think is not really true.

00:30:34: Hariharan Arevalagam: I mean, if you actually go out there and talk to somebody and get to know them as a person, I think those walls will be broken down pretty quick. Um, so I feel like they, they actively avoid opportunities where they would be able to practice.

00:30:47: Brett Ellis: Well, there's, there's a good German word that kind of encapsulates that too. It's called Bringschuld. It means that there's a certain obligation that you bring. And that's what I tried to always remember is that I was coming to Germany. To them.

00:30:58: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:30:59: Brett Ellis: To Germans. They didn't, they weren't coming to me.

00:31:01: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:31:02: Brett Ellis: They weren't coming to my home to study, they weren't coming to my university to study. I was going to them. So there was a certain element of I need to, to always make that first step. And it's easy to get resentful about stuff like that. But I felt like I'm

going to them, I'm going to their home, I'm going to their culture. I need to be the one to be active here. And I felt like once I did that, Germans for the most part, open up.

00:31:25: Brett Ellis: I've gone back and forth on that. Are Germans cold or Americans too hot and too emotional and too loud and boisterous and stuff like that? And it's an individual personal thing. I feel like Germans value real connections. A lot more than maybe Americans do in the sense that they, Americans love to have like quick, small, fleeting, small talk.

00:31:45: Brett Ellis: Yeah. It's a certain art And Germans, they stick their, they stick their nose up and then think, ah, there's, there's no real connection there. And that's, I would counter, that's not the point of small talk. The small, the point of small talk is just to have a nice friendly interaction and so that both people leave feeling a little bit better about themselves.

00:32:00: Brett Ellis: And, but with Germans you have to approach it with a different mindset. And also, like I said, with. I felt, I always felt the need to approach it in a way that I was the one being active. I was the one going to them. I was the one asking questions. I was the one engaging them in conversations. And that didn't always work out.

00:32:17: Brett Ellis: It didn't always result in a friendship or an acquaintanceship or anything, but it, you just have to, you have to take that first step. And I think also what's important is to realize that language and culture are inseparably intertwined.

00:32:30: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:32:31: Brett Ellis: So if you say, I wanna learn German, but I don't like German culture, that doesn't work, that doesn't compute.

00:32:36: Brett Ellis: You need to say, I think there's a lot of cool stuff about German culture that I wanna learn about and I want to improve my language. That computes. That. That makes sense. And you don't have to, there's, you don't have to be a scholar of Germany and Germans to do that, but you have to be willing to, want to learn more about them, their backgrounds, their culture, their region, their country, their history, all of that, because that relates to their lang, the language so directly and language is a result of that, and language evolves through that lens.

00:33:10: Brett Ellis: You can't say, I just wanna learn the language, like from a book. And then not have to do with Germans because that doesn't make sense. So there's a certain people who are new to Germany need to discover that spark for German culture that interests them. And I think once they find that, like the language kind of follows. The motivation to learn the language follows.

00:33:33: Brett Ellis: Um, and that's a deeply personal question. It's like, how do, how, what do I like about Germany and about German culture that I really wanna learn about or that interests me enough that I could segue from that into like a reason for learning the language to a specific point, because let's be honest here, learning a language is not really fun in a lot of ways.

00:33:51: Brett Ellis: It's hard work, it's a lot of studying, a lot of memorization, a lot of trial and error, a lot of failing and a lot of miscommunication and which is one of the hardest things, especially if you're so accustomed to communicating your thoughts in your native language or in English because you've spent a decade or more learning it, and then you start over.

00:34:11: Brett Ellis: And you think, I'm a baby again and I don't know how to communicate. And this could lead to problems. It could lead to embarrassment and you that you need a strong motivation to put yourself through that. And I, for me personally, I've found finding connections with people and culture were the most important keys to finding the motivation to, to study the language.

00:34:32: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah, I think that's a key ingredient that's really missing for a lot of people. A lot of people come here thinking about, yeah, it's a very affordable, high quality education. I learned the language as just a means to get around. But having no interest in culture whatsoever. And I think that whether they know it or not is a huge impediment to actually.

00:34:50: Brett Ellis: Agreed.Yeah.

00:34:51: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. And there's something like, I sort of learned the hard way because cultural differences are quite significant and the gaps between them do get bigger depending on where you're from.

00:35:00: Brett Ellis: Absolutely. Yeah.

00:35:01: Hariharan Arevalagam: Like the, like the famous one for me, which I had trouble with in the beginning was the straightforwardness and how straight to the point, uh, Germans tend to be like, where I'm from. If someone offers you something, you almost always say, no thank you at first just to be polite. And then naturally they would follow up with a little bit of a push to act for you to actually say yes. The thing is, we wanted that right from the beginning, but saying, yes, please, it is seen as kind of rude where I'm from, but over here, like obviously I would do that in some situations and if they've offered me something, I'd say, no thank you. And they'd say, okay, and just take it around. I'll like, wait what? I thought, you know, funny things like that. Yeah.

00:35:37: Brett Ellis: Yeah. I can relate to, I have the advantage that I would more identify with the German thought process because I wouldn't have that, that intricate cultural understanding that my no is actually sort of a yes because I, I used this kind of intonation and maybe I was a little bit coy about it or something like that.

00:35:55: Brett Ellis: I would, that would be something where I would stumble a lot if I moved to Malaysia, for example. And that would, some of the best lessons we have are the ones that are painful. And that goes back all the way to, for babies, it's just they remember not to touch a hot stove pretty quickly and doing that, like in get, having that intense, radiating sense of embarrassment. Oh my God, what have I done here in this situation? That's a great way that you'll, it's a great lesson you'll never forget. You have to embrace those kinds of things. If you're really interested, if you're really serious about learning about the people, the culture and their language, you have to accept that will happen and just embrace it and then learn to laugh about it afterwards. So I guess the only way to stay sane.

00:36:33: Hariharan Arevalagam: Do you think there's a way to like integrate this cultural aspect of it more into the language teaching process? More than just learning the grammar rules, learning the vocabulary and all that stuff, because a lot of people focus so much on that and they forget how language and culture are inseparable.

00:36:49: Hariharan Arevalagam: Is there, do you think there's a way to introduce that more?

00:36:52: Brett Ellis: I think books like teaching materials have gone come a long way over the years and find a good balance between current topics and like a codified learning progression because frankly, there's a lot of things that you, that have to be taught in a certain way.

00:37:08: Brett Ellis: You can maybe play around a little bit with the order, but you need certain, you need a certain basis before you can move on to more advanced stuff. That is a basic principle. The problem with books obviously is that Germany, because of its history, um, has another good German word, Kleinstaaterei. As this, because of the fact that it was so many little principalities for so many centuries that like regions can be dramatically different from one another.

00:37:30: Brett Ellis: So they have to do a one size fits all solution. So they'll be teaching you about Brandenburg, and then we're here at the Lower Rhine and you'll think, what does this have to do with me? So they have that, that that problem. And they have the problem obviously that materials go out of date and culture is continuously changing and it's a living, evolving thing.

00:37:47: Brett Ellis: I think wherever a teacher or a student for that matter can integrate an actual real life experience into the lesson through a story or through an through a retelling or something like that. That's a very valuable thing and I think it's a good thinking exercise for

each language learner to think about how what they're learning actually relates to their experiences.

00:38:06: Brett Ellis: To put it in a real context that kind of breathes life into the language. And it goes back to what we were just talking about with connecting culture and language. And so it's you gotta, each person is in, it's incumbent upon them to add a personal touch to their situation or to find the things that resonate with them.

00:38:26: Brett Ellis: And that's gonna be different for you. And it's gonna be different for me. Yeah. It's gonna be different for everybody. Yeah. So I think that part of the journey with learning a new language, and especially maybe German in particular, but it's not exclusive to German, is to think about it like on a, like a Meta Ebene.

00:38:41: Brett Ellis: Or that's a good way of j just switched right into German, cuz that's a, and like on a meta level, not to think about how the stuff you're learning relates to things that interest you in terms of culture and how the language affects your daily life, or maybe in how it relates to your goals as well.

00:38:57: Brett Ellis: It's a very, it's a very complicated tapestry of things and the language course kind of serves as a springboard. But it, it's not gonna serve as the be all, end all stop gap for learning the language. You can learn, you can move to Germany, not speak a word of German and have the worst year of your life and come out speaking really good German at the end.

00:39:15: Brett Ellis: But it would be a hard year. It would be a long slog and it would be a year full of privation and sacrifice and pain and embarrassment and triumph at the end. That's one way of doing it. That kind of a into the frying pan, outta the frying pan into the fire type of thing. Or you could really focus on the courses and then not do much outside and then make some easy, comfortable progress and get somewhere where you can, you can read kind of, well, you can, you can speak in certain situations, but you never feel really comfortable. There's a lot of different ways of going about it, and it's real. It's, but yeah, I guess long story short, it's really the mindset. Yeah.

00:39:53: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. We circle back to mindset.

00:39:55: Brett Ellis: Yeah. Circle back to the mindset. It just keeps coming back to that because it's an individual thing and I can't offer any recommendations other than generalities. But I know from personal experience that when you find the right thing, it will resonate with you and it will make sense. It just inherently makes sense.

00:40:10: Hariharan Arevalagam: I recently started studying again on my own. From the very basics, because I actually like the way the German language sounds. So that's the thing.

What if a person is in this situation and they want to really get into the whole shebang, but they don't like the way a language sounds?

00:40:26: Hariharan Arevalagam: Cuz I think that's a big thing. Right? If you don't like the way it sounds, you lack, uh, quite a bit of motivation to really learn it and you can't decide what's your favorite food. So it's those things that they really don't have much control.

00:40:36: Brett Ellis: I can't. I guess to wrap around back to the idea of a glass half full or half empty.

00:40:46: Brett Ellis: German is a very phonetic language that is very precise in its phonetics. So whereas in English or in other languages, like other romance languages, you have all these spellings that are, that result in completely strange pronunciations and German, which is what you get. So it may not sound, uh, like, it may not quite like the way it sounds, but I think it's a good thing to appreciate the fact that you, the way it's written is the way it's spoken.

00:41:10: Brett Ellis: And that's a nice feature of the language. So, Looking for little silver linings like that maybe. And then I think it's probably, I don't know, maybe it's just, maybe it's just how, maybe you're just unaccustomed to it too. Some people speak German in a very ugly way. I'm not gonna sugarcoat it, but I still think Hochdeutsch, the way it's spoken in official context is still a pretty amazing language.

00:41:32: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:41:33: Brett Ellis: It's not as melodious as, as Russian for example, or French or anything like that. It's not gonna have that kind of inherent beauty to it, but it has a certain directness and simplicity that I think is an economy. Economy of language. One of the things that's a double-edged sword, because one German word "annehmen", for example, mean a dozen different things depending on the context.

00:41:51: Brett Ellis: But that has, that means you only have to learn the word once, but you also, you have to learn how it's used and how it's applied. Economy of language is a certain nicety and a certain advantage of the language as well. So I think you're not gonna change the way German sounds just because you don't like it.

00:42:06: Brett Ellis: And Germans aren't gonna stop speaking that way just because it's not your preference. So learn to live with it and learn to ex look at the brighter side of things, I guess, is what I would say. And for you, I would say, personally, I find my language is a lot, my German is a lot sharper after I do a lot of reading in German.

00:42:24: Brett Ellis: Not speaking is one thing, but to really get like a flourishing, robust vocabulary, I would start reading books in German and just start thinking about the words more and just picturing them. I'm a visual learner, so I like to see the words on the paper and that helps me a lot. I feel like my German is always just a tad sharper after I do some reading in German.

00:42:45: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah, there's, there is a relatively new resource called Deutsch Perfekt.

00:42:48: Brett Ellis: Okay.

00:42:48: Hariharan Arevalagam: I think you've heard of, I dunno if you've heard of it, it's a magazine, sort of these German learners for German learners.

00:42:53: Brett Ellis: Yeah, exactly. It's got, yeah, it's a, it's a, an engaging, yeah.

00:42:56: Hariharan Arevalagam: I've recently started with that actually. I agree with that point that you said for sure.

00:43:01: Brett Ellis: Yeah. That's, and find things that you enjoy. That's the thing too. Mindset. Yeah. But find things you enjoy. If you're sitting there reading like a manual of a microwave, you're not gonna enjoy it. You're gonna be learning something, but you're not gonna be enjoying it.

00:43:14: Brett Ellis: And don't go pick up a book you don't like. Don't pick up a mystery novel when you're more interested in non-fiction. Go to the library and pick up a book that you, that in, in interests you. Cuz if you like the subject matter, you will tolerate the language and you will slog your way through it, even if you only know every third word.

00:43:30: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yep. So I guess the biggest takeaways here for, um, students learning German is mindset and find something that you like.

00:43:38: Brett Ellis: Mindset, realistic expectations. A willingness to put in the work. I mean, there's resources here. There's resources we can point students towards, but it really comes down to personal, personal engagement, personal mindset.

00:43:54: Brett Ellis: I've seen students who flounder at certain levels and I've seen students who have, who come out. After, you know, a few, few semesters speaking and writing German to us in a really beautiful German and I, I always envy those people because they have a strong drive to do that and it's hard to find that drive sometimes.

00:44:11: Brett Ellis: And that's not to say that the onus is on, only on the students, obviously. What's a good, what's that saying? Um, in German, jeder ist seines Glückes Schmied. So you're in charge of your own destiny.

00:44:22: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah.

00:44:22: Brett Ellis: Everyone is a blacksmith of their own happiness if you translate it literally. There's a lot of things we can't control in life.

00:44:28: Brett Ellis: And there's a lot of things that aren't. That we don't like, and that could be better. So it's important to, especially in terms of language learning, it's important to focus on the things you can affect and to not get bogged down in things that could be better but aren't, and things like that. It's, it's the mindset.

00:44:46: Brett Ellis: It's a growth mindset and improvement mindset will pay dividends, but it will be hard and it will be uncomfortable, but it's worth it.

00:44:55: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yeah. Everyone's a blacksmith of their own destiny. I think that's beautiful. It's beautiful. And that's also,

00:45:00: Brett Ellis: That's a problem. If you speak German for so long, you start to forget things like that. Or you, like I said, you don't forget it. It's just, if I spend two weeks in the US all of that will come back to me.

00:45:09: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yep. That's a, that's also a great way to wrap up this conversation.

00:45:14: Brett Ellis: Yeah. That was fun.

00:45:15: Hariharan Arevalagam: Yep. Thank you. Thank you very much, Brett.

00:45:17: Brett Ellis: Thank you.

00:45:20: Hariharan Arevalagam: That was the second episode of Voices. We welcome all feedback and are always looking for ways to improve. You can reach us directly at podcast@hsrw.eu and in the show notes you can find links and more information about today's topics and guests. My name is Hari. Thanks for listening and talk to you next time.