*Norbert is unlocking the mysteries of language learning*

# The magic of languages

**Professor Norbert Schlüter's** work uncovers the wonders of language and inspires the teachers of tomorrow

**Words:** *Marianne Rawlins*

## Biography
Professor Norbert Schlüter is a researcher and lecturer in the English Department at Leipzig University, Germany. He is currently working on the Language Magician project to support the learning and teaching of foreign languages at primary school level. Leipzig University is one of 10 partners in the project, along with ALL.

## Professor Norbert Schlüter
## Language researcher and lecturer

The field of linguistics still holds many unknowns. Why do some people struggle with words and grammar when learning a language, while others find it easy? Is Noam Chomsky's claim that we are born with a predisposition to acquire a language really true? What can neuroscience tell us about the languagelearning process? "There are still so many open questions and that's why it is fascinating to work in this area," says Professor Norbert Schlüter, researcher and lecturer in the English Department at Leipzig University, Germany.

Norbert's passion for languages was ignited when he was studying English and maths at the Freie Universität Berlin, with the ambition of becoming a teacher. During his studies, he worked as a research assistant on a variety of projects in corpus linguistics. "In this research field, large collections of language samples are used to investigate grammatical structures or lexical features of a language," explains Norbert. "I helped to get a better picture of verb phrases expressing the future in English and we used the information to improve text books."

### Linguistic investigations
After finishing his school-based training, Norbert taught English and maths at grammar schools in Berlin for three years. In 1997, he started a PhD while working as an assistant lecturer at the Freie Universität Berlin. "I dealt with an empirical investigation of the present perfect, classifying more than 3,000 authentic utterances containing this verb phrase," he says. Shortly after finishing his PhD in 2002, he was offered a professorship in applied linguistics and English language pedagogy at the University of Education in Weingarten, Baden-Württemberg.

In April 2007, Norbert joined the English Department at Leipzig

> **"I am interested in comparing first language acquisition processes with how children learn another language"**



**Above** Norbert with two members of his research team on the Language Magician project, preparing the pre-tests at Leipzig University



University and has since been working there as Professor for English language pedagogy. The main focus of his research is teaching English at primary level. "I enjoy investigating all aspects of foreign language learning and teaching. However, I have always been particularly interested in first language acquisition processes and comparing them to how children learn another language, especially English," he says.

**Above** Norbert in front of the Albertina Library at Leipzig University. The library was inaugurated in 1891

### The state of play in Germany
Changes in language teaching in Germany have inspired Norbert's studies. Traditionally, German students began learning languages at the start of secondary school, but in 2005 learning a language became compulsory for all pupils at primary school. Now more than 90% of all German children learn English as their first foreign language at primary school. "This earlier start for language learning triggered a controversial debate about appropriate teaching methods and materials for young learners," says Norbert. "Questions about the emphasis of the four skills – listening comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension and writing – had to be answered. Through a think tank called BIG-Kreis, I got together with a number of colleagues and we found we were struggling to define the

## Norbert's typical day

**NORBERT'S TYPICAL DAY** is varied and packed with activity. "I usually start work between 8 and 9 am, when I begin preparing for the day at my office. I check emails and answer any urgent enquiries from my students or the university administration. I also plan upcoming activities, such as project meetings, with my secretary."

He then leaves his office and either walks over to the main building of the university or takes the tram to another university building. "There, I'll lecture our undergraduate students on issues around English language teaching in grammar schools, comprehensive schools or at vocational training schools. Classes at Leipzig University last for 90 minutes with a 30-minute break between two lectures or seminars."

Norbert teaches four classes per week either to undergraduate or post-graduate students. "If I don't have a lecture or seminar, my colleagues from the Romance and Slavic language pedagogy and I meet with our PhD students. They will have prepared talks on their theses and together we evaluate their progress and discuss further steps in their research."

He doesn't have much time to spare for lunch: "I'll either have a sandwich in my office or meet colleagues from the English department for a quick lunch in a nearby restaurant. Then I hurry back to hold my 'office hour'. I usually find a long queue of students who want to ask me about a range of topics, such as which classes to take, exam preparation or questions around their Erasmus studies." Every fortnight, Norbert meets his colleagues from the English department to discuss administrative and educational matters. "I also

regularly meet with the members of my language pedagogy staff to talk about our timetable for the upcoming terms or the organisation of teaching internships for our students.

"In the afternoon, I am also involved in examining our post-graduate students in their final oral exams and assessing their written paper. My normal work day finishes between 5 and 6pm. Occasionally I have to attend meetings, which might last until 8pm.

"If I still have time on my hands, I work on my research projects, for example the EU-project The Language Magician. We are currently testing the first version of The Language Magician computer game at schools in and around Leipzig. By the end of November, we had tested 26 classes at 12 schools, and we are now looking at the results of the participants, asking: how many students managed to complete all tasks? How many tasks were completed on average? What is the maximum number of correctly completed tasks? How many tasks could the learners correctly complete on average?

"We will also look at the different tasks and levels and find out which tasks/levels were easier and which tasks/levels were more difficult for learners. The results will help us find out what competencies the learners have achieved after a certain number of language lessons and we will also be able to improve individual aspects of the computer game. All results will be presented at the first conference of the project, on 27 January 2017 at Leipzig University." Further details on the conference can be found here: **www.tlm-conference-leipzig.com.** For more on this project, see overleaf.

Norbert in a lecture hall at Leipzig University

## "I enjoy working with students at university level – it is satisfying to see them advance and become teachers"

best ways of teaching languages to young learners."

The group published a number of recommendations on topics such as best practice in language teaching at primary school; standards in primary teacher education; assessment and evaluation of language learning at primary school; language learning as a continuous process from primary to secondary school; and early content and integrated language learning (CLIL).

### Establishing evidence
Norbert also wanted to address the lack of empirical investigations into teaching English at primary level. "Only a couple of surveys existed in Germany, but none at a national level," he says. In 2011, he suggested carrying out the first national study to investigate the language competence of English language learners at the end of grade 4. After two years of preparation, in the summer of 2013, more than

2,100 pupils from 114 classes in 80 schools across Germany were tested in listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing. Six pupils from each class were asked to take part in a speaking test. In addition, all students as well as all participating teachers, completed a questionnaire sharing information on their favourite learning and teaching methods. "The results of this unique survey were presented to the public at the Fourth Conference on Early Language Learning in October 2015 at Leipzig University and published in German under the title: *BIG-Kreis: Der Lernstand im Englischunterricht am Ende von Klasse 4 – Ergebnisse der BIG-Studie*," says Norbert (*see 'Find out more' below*).

Norbert relishes the chance to share his findings and to help shape the next generation of teachers: "I enjoy working with students at university level – it is very satisfying to see them advance and become professional teachers."

### *Find out more*
- *BIG-Kreis (Hrsg.) (2015) Der Lernstand im Englischunterricht am Ende von Klasse 4 – Ergebnisse der BIG-Studie. München: Domino Verlag (tinyurl.com/bigkreisstudy)*

# The Language Magician

**THE LANGUAGE MAGICIAN** is a European research project, initiated by the Goethe-Institut in London and co-funded by the European Union via Erasmus+. ALL is one of 10 partners from the UK, Italy, Spain and Germany that are participating in the project, which deals with standardisation and assessment in language learning at primary level across Europe.

The main aim of the project is to develop a computer game that can be used as an assessment tool in primary schools, called The Language Magician. The game will be fun for the language learners, build on their language and computer skills and provide feedback for pupils and teachers on the language competence of the learners, using non-threatening testing methods.

Leipzig University is in charge of comparing teaching methods and standards in all participating European countries, as well as pre-testing the first version of the computer game. "We will take a closer look at the data produced in the pre-tests and investigate the quality and validity of the test items," says Norbert. "We would also like to carry out long-term investigations to compare and improve language teaching across Europe."

Norbert says the project has already proved illuminating: "In comparing the conditions under which foreign languages are taught in Spain, Italy, Germany and the UK, it became clear that the time allocated to teaching a foreign language and the objectives to be accomplished are quite diverse. The Language Magician computer game will give us an insight into microcosms of language teaching across Europe."

Regular updates on the project are published at **www.thelanguagemagician.net**. You can also watch a short trailer that shows how the computer game works at **tinyurl.com/lmtrailer**.