

Pragmatic marker acquisition in the study abroad context

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This paper reports on the results of a PhD study on the acquisition of pragmatic markers by German adolescents on either a 5-month or 10-month exchange to Australia. Their acquisition is compared to German adolescents learning English in Germany. Central to the research is variation in the study abroad context, giving rise to diverse language contact experiences, which impact on pragmatic marker acquisition and use. While such variation is also present in home country language learning contexts, its parameters are limited, resulting in increased homogeneity of pragmatic marker acquisition and use.

The study brings together a range of research areas, which have rarely been combined to date: study abroad, second language acquisition, pragmatic markers and adolescent language. Essentially data driven, it draws on a number of approaches to the study of pragmatic markers, including functional analysis and Relevance and Coherence theories.

The data is from two groups of 16-17-year-olds: twenty-eight exchange students to Australia (experimental) and twenty German adolescents without study abroad experience (control). Answering calls for more longitudinal research in developmental pragmatics, data were collected before and after the exchange. These are audio-recordings of an unstructured task (informal conversation) and a structured task (retelling of a Mr Bean episode). The informal conversation took between 10 to 15 minutes and the Mr Bean task between 2 to 10 minutes. All participants completed the same tasks. A language contact questionnaire provides information about the experimental and control groups' use of German and English, helping to explain variation in acquisition due to contextual language contact factors.

After transcription, markers were coded for type and function. A language contact score was calculated for each experimental and control group participant, based on the answers they provided in the language contact questionnaires. Pre versus post marker usage was then compared within (e.g. 5-month vs. 10-month acquisition) and across the groups. Language contact scores were used to explain outliers and large variations within and across the experimental and control groups.

In line with the results of smaller scale study abroad and pragmatic marker research, there was an increase in exchange student use of pragmatic markers, particularly markers of vague language and reporting speech. Acquisition in the study abroad context was much higher than in the non-exchange data. However, there was a high degree of inter-individual variation. The questionnaires indicate that this is linked not only to diversity in initial proficiency, but also to an individual's ability to seek out a range of language contact situations. Success of host family relations may also play a role. Implications for future research as well as study abroad programmes are discussed.