

The development of Oral Proficiency during a study abroad program

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The main question of this ongoing study is **how students improve oral proficiency** during a semester abroad in Germany. "How" means several things in this context: How much do they improve? In what developmental stages do they improve? How does it happen (personal habits, learning styles)? How (if at all) can it be facilitated?

The study abroad context was picked for the following reasons: while there will always remain a lot of variables, this specific program is organized in a way that allows for a fairly controlled environment. All students are there for the same length of time and take the same courses, and all students stay in host families in the same town. All students of the group have had between 4 and 5 semesters of college-level instruction in German.

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview has been shown to be a reliable and valid tool to assess the functional speaking ability in a foreign language. I am a certified ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview tester. This is an important precondition for ensuring the quality and credibility of my project. The first cycle of data gathering for the project started in November of 2005 before the study abroad program and ended in May 2006 at the end of the program. I conducted and tape recorded two oral interviews per student and rated the OPIs according to the established ACTFL scale.

A simple comparison between a student's pre- and post-study-abroad OPI Levels can indicate only to a certain extent how much the oral proficiency of students improved because the OPI measures only major changes in proficiency. The 10 different proficiency levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced with Low, Mid, High sublevels, and Superior) encompass a large range of performances and each level subsumes the criteria of the levels below it. Since the facility with language increases exponentially, the speed of progress from level to level slows down considerable at the levels beyond Novice. Therefore, the comparison of OPI ratings themselves might not do overt justice to the improvement that has actually happened.

However, every OPI provides a large sample of spontaneously produced speech that lends itself well to further investigation. All interviews were also transcribed and an "internal" analysis of the interviews was conducted, focusing on two word order rules of German, so-called inversion structures (sentences with pre-posed adverbial phrases or objects in initial position) and verb final constructions found in subordinate clauses. Second Language Acquisition research suggests that the acquisition of German word order, specifically the placement of the finite and non-finite parts of the verb, consistently progresses through five hierarchical stages. Inversion and Verb-Final are the last two stages of this progression. Following previous studies, I decided to look "inside" the OPI to find more subtle evidence of the improvement of oral proficiency. Focusing on inversion and verb-final constructions, this analysis can show how students improved over the course of the semester abroad. It also shows what correlations can be found between the acquisition of these two word order rules and the OPI levels, and how close students are getting to the next level on the proficiency scale.

Students wrote short paragraphs on specific topics before and after the study abroad program that were analyzed according to the same features as the OPI samples to allow for a comparison between oral and written improvement. Students were asked to write a weekly summary of their activities and a short reflection on what they think they learned that week and how they reacted to problems. By coding these, I had hoped to

find correlations between oral proficiency improvement and personal behaviors. However, I found that students should be asked to answer very specific, quantifiable questions to get more usable results.

The same cycle of data gathering and analysis will be repeated next year to allow for statistically more valid conclusions. Eventually, probably in the third cycle, I would like to introduce an intervention to see if the improvement of oral proficiency in general and the acquisition of the two word order rules in particular can be influenced by instruction.