

At-home language skills development requires strong motivation, study shows

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The coronavirus pandemic was an unwelcome surprise to thousands of Erasmus students. However, high levels of foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence can also be acquired at home. A recent study shows that self-motivation, strategy and reflection are the driving forces for honing such skills.

Every year hundreds of thousands of students take part in the world's largest mobility program, Erasmus+. This year, however, thousands had to return home early due to the coronavirus pandemic. As the situation in the coming winter term is still uncertain, the question arises whether a stay abroad is the only way to develop high levels of second [language](#) proficiency?

In a comprehensive study funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF, Gianna Hessel, an applied linguist at the University of Graz, explored how foreign language skills, language learning motivation, and intercultural competence actually develop during and after an Erasmus stay.

The results of this study are now available. For the first time, a part of her investigation dealt with the initial nine months after the students' return. Hessel conducted the project as a longitudinal study in which more than one hundred participants were surveyed and tested at several points in time. The survey participants included a control group of Erasmus+ applicants who continued to pursue their studies at the home university. These aspects had not been explored in the context of Erasmus in the past, nor had studies involved students from such a wide range of disciplines, from the humanities and social sciences to engineering.

Self-motivation is key to successful language learning

Two important objectives of Erasmus+ are increased foreign language proficiency and intercultural awareness. Hessel was able to follow 81 German-speaking students during the return phase using a mix of methods, including questionnaires, multiple language tests, and interviews. All students came from German universities and had spent one or two semesters at a UK university. "Given that the English language learning backgrounds of German and Austrian students tend to

be very similar, the results seem quite transferable," says Hessel.

A key finding of the post-return study: whilst the majority of returnees were able to maintain the acquired level of English proficiency during the first six months after their return, there was also no further improvement, "even though more than two thirds of the participants continued to speak English several times per week and read some of their academic course literature in English," says Hessel. Those students, however, who studied English as part of their degree course, e.g., English studies or teacher training, showed a tendency towards further progress during the return phase. Surprisingly perhaps, this was not related to the higher number of classes they attended that were taught in English.

"For most of them, self-motivation for language learning, another aspect I researched, was strongly linked to their future professional self-image. Achieving high levels of language proficiency and being perceived as highly competent speakers in their future profession were strong, immediate motives," says Hessel. High levels of self-motivation caused the students to strategically plan their language learning, and thus continue developing their skills at home.



Spending a semester abroad does not automatically improve students' skills. As current research shows, such an improvement requires clear aims and strategies. Credit: Naassom Azevedo/unsplash

Actively promoting strategy, reflection and soft skills

The relevance of self-motivation for language learning success is also demonstrated by a comparison of the linguistic progress between the Erasmus students and the control group that continued to study at the home university. During the first three months, foreign language

proficiency tended to increase significantly among Erasmus students, but gains slowed thereafter and tended to be no higher than in the control group in most cases. The likelihood of successfully maintaining English proficiency levels post-return increased with the level of overall proficiency and confidence in speaking achieved by the end of the stay abroad.

Hessel sees this as a challenge for universities to provide more support for students in terms of language development, especially after their return. "The belief that students will return from their stay abroad linguistically proficient and interculturally competent is another idealized notion that is also commonly found at universities," notes Hessel, who feels that we may still fail to realize that the development of foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence are lifelong learning processes. Realistic, confident assessments of one's own capabilities, reflection, practice, clear goals and strategies for improvement are key to improving language and intercultural competence.

Skills can be acquired at home

In terms of intercultural competence, Hessel explored how the students' self-perceived ability to interact with people belonging to other groups and their awareness of potentially culture-related differences in expectations and behaviors evolved. "Self-efficacy increased during the first three months of the stay abroad, but declined for the majority of students after their return. Intercultural competence is acquired only through a combination of experience and reflection. If there are no opportunities for guided reflection when students return to the home university, self-reflection tends to fall short and students are left with the experience only. This means that a lot of potential for transformative learning is left unused," says Gianna Hessel.

Interactions with people who have different "cultural backgrounds" (group affiliations) hold great potential for intercultural learning. Opportunities for engaging in such interactions should be actively pursued both at home and abroad, for example by engaging with people of different ages, different social or professional backgrounds, ideally accompanied by guided reflection. "The study shows that there is no reason for assuming that students should not be able to achieve very high levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence at their home university," Hessel states.

These are encouraging prospects, therefore, for all those unable to enjoy an Erasmus stay because of the coronavirus crisis or for other reasons.

More information: Gianna Hessel. Study abroad and the Erasmus+ programme in Europe, *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1075/sar.19011.hes](https://doi.org/10.1075/sar.19011.hes)

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