

Phraseological use and development during a stay abroad

What this research was about and why it is important

Phraseological competence refers to the ability to understand and produce conventional word combinations (e.g., collocations, idioms). Within usage-based approaches to language acquisition, several characteristics of the input are considered determinants of learning and may thus influence the development of phraseological competence. Among these are frequency and cue contingency. All else being equal, higher frequency and greater reliability of form–meaning mapping (i.e., cue contingency) in the input facilitate learning. As a result, a change in learning context—and the associated change in input—may influence phraseological development. For example, a stay-abroad experience may result in a change in phraseological use, with learners using more frequent phraseological units and units that have stronger cue contingency. However, past research has shown mixed results with respect to this question, which may reflect the fact that other potentially important variables (such as the task being completed or the proficiency of the learners) have not always been considered. In this study, we analyzed the combinations of nouns and adjectives used by learners of Spanish and French before a stay abroad and 1 year later. We determined the frequency and the cue contingency for all combinations, and we determined whether usage patterns were influenced by variables such as time and task. We contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning the impact of a stay abroad on language development, while also moving the discussion forward by providing an analysis that accounts for multiple variables simultaneously.

What the researchers did

- The participants were 50 British learners of Spanish ($n = 25$) or French ($n = 25$) who were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in the United Kingdom, majoring in either Spanish or French.
- We analyzed all noun + adjective combinations produced by the learners before and after an academic year abroad. For each combination, we used a reference corpus to determine its frequency and its cue contingency.
- Our analysis focused on how five different variables influenced the noun/adjective combinations used. The analysis allowed us to answer the following question: To what extent did phraseological use vary over time, by task, by target language, by phraseological unit, and with respect to initial proficiency?

What the researchers found

- Overall, no change over time was detected.
- Results showed that phraseological use is significantly influenced by task, target language and, especially, phraseological unit.

Things to consider

- This study suggests that a 9-month stay abroad does not influence the phraseological use of learners, at least with regard to noun + adjective combinations.
- Phraseological use varies with respect to task, target language, and phraseological unit.
- Given the importance of phraseological unit in the analyses, it may be that other phraseological units (e.g., other collocations) may show development over the course of a stay abroad.

Material, data, open access article: We analyzed data from the publicly available corpus LANGSNAP. Materials are publicly available via IRIS (<http://www.iris-database.org>).

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