

## Undergraduate student talk about decisions to withdraw from study abroad

### What this research was about and why it is important

This study helps us understand how a group of US-based undergraduate students made decisions from the moment they showed an interest in a study abroad (SA) program with a language focus until they withdrew from it. It examines the different people to whom these students assigned responsibility as part of students' decision-making processes.

This research is important because: (a) it looks at an undergraduate student population that we do not know much about, i.e., students who make attempts to pursue SA but ultimately cannot or do not; (b) it expands the view of decision-making as a process that can be heavily influenced by other people, institutions, and what others have tended to say about SA and higher education; (c) it exemplifies how to establish connections between students' concrete language use in the interview and their decision-making trajectories, making it possible to suggest practical and novel ways to cover reported speech in the language classroom.

### What the researchers did

- We interviewed 4 undergraduate students studying in a U.S. university about their decision-making processes leading up to their application to and withdrawal from SA programs.
- We focused on
  - how they represented their capacity to act when making these decisions in their answers to the interview questions,
  - how the decision-making may have been influenced by common beliefs about people, things, events, and activities that are related to SA, which with time tend to become accepted truths regardless of whether they are indeed accurate (e.g., SA is not for serious study; it's just for fun).
- In our analysis, we addressed three questions regarding these students' decision-making processes: (a) to whom they gave voice and their stance toward those voices; (b) how they chose to give voice to those people (i.e., the specific language they used), and (c) how they used what other people had said to assign responsibility for their actions, eventually leading to a withdrawal from a SA program.

### What the researchers found

- The students quoted (a) themselves to describe their own (unexpressed) thoughts as they were making these decisions (e.g., "and so I thought..."); (b) many "others" through different authors referring to students as part of a collective (e.g., "everyone was like 'you should study abroad'"); and (c) hypothetical voices of SA leadership to express critical views of SA programs (e.g., a participant assumes the voice of SA program organizers to argue that they should consider different names for the courses taught abroad in order for students to take them more seriously).
- The students used different ways to introduce reported speech, such as the verb '(was) like' when introducing vague referents, or the word 'well' when introducing a retelling of the participants' own thoughts.
- In retelling their thoughts ('inner speech'), quoting others, or using hypothetical reported speech, the participants talked about their responsibility by reusing discourses, or what others have tended to say about SA and higher education (e.g., SA is a way to quickly complete a language requirement). This shows how wide-reaching dominant discourses have the potential to be, and that they can continually be part of some college students' imaginations about who they are becoming and/or who they would (not) like to become.

### Things to consider

- In responding to our interview questions, it is possible that the participants (a) were framing their answers knowing that the interviewers were (at least) members of the departments in charge of leading their SA programs; (b) were reassessing their decision making (i.e., using the interview to modify some of their decision making after the fact).
- We highlight the importance of taking a process-oriented approach in analyzing students' capacity to act, thus representing their decisions as a trajectory rather than a fixed act for a well-rounded understanding of why some students decide to do something (e.g., sign up for a SA program) but then change their minds.

**Materials, data, open access article:** N/A

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