A study on pragmatic competencies in university students, examining effects of English medium instruction, stay abroad, and attitudes.

Jennifer Ament, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, and Carmen Pérez-Vidal, Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

The multilingual, multicultural university is becoming the norm rather than the exception across Europe, often with an international remit. Entire degree programs being taught through an English Medium Instruction (EMI) approach are on the rise, with the goal of internationalization being further supported by study abroad (SA) programs, more specifically the ERASMUS mobility scheme (Pérez-Vidal, 2011, 2014). It is important to know what kind of linguistic progress to expect from these EMI programs, when experienced by learners in combination with SA periods, and in addition to formal instruction (FI). The domain of pragmatics is especially interesting because it is often not taught in FI courses, taken either at home or abroad, nor in EMI courses, even though it is a crucial competency when interacting in English for any purpose. To date, research on linguistic gains in EMI is mainly qualitative; findings have yielded more perceived benefits than losses in EMI (Tazl, 2011). Investigating pragmatics, Taguchi (2014) measured Japanese EMI students on their ability to express opinions appropriately in formal and informal situations. Findings showed that pragmatic competence developed at lower rates than other domains of linguistic proficiency. While controlling for motivation and proficiency, Takahashi (2012) found intrinsic motivation yielded a significant correlation with learners’ progress in pragmalinguistic awareness. Looking at the effects of study abroad on pragmatic gains, Alcón-Soler (2015) found that the combination of FI while on a SA showed an immediate effect on production of mitigators. However, the increase was not sustained and length of stay showed to have an effect. The current study examines pragmalinguistic development, specifically the ability to recognize as well as produce appropriate discourse markers in different contexts and for different functions. The research question is: Do students improve their pragmalinguistic competencies after experiencing a three-month SA in an English-speaking country, with a component of FI, after following EMI courses at home? The study controls for proficiency (Cambridge Proficiency test) and attitudes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2002). This cross sectional study tests participants (N = 30) enrolled in EMI together with a SA experience including FI in the target language country. Both qualitative (questionnaire, observation, and interviews) and quantitative data are considered. Oral and written discourse completion tasks and appropriateness judgments were used to elicit data on the implicit and explicit knowledge participants had concerning the appropriate placement and context for discourse markers. The data is analyzed statistically and findings are discussed.

References


