Becoming a highly proficient speaker appears rather too costly: examining the impact of study abroad in the UK on self-motivation to continue learning English

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In this talk, I will examine the impact of an extended study abroad experience in the UK on self-motivation to continue learning English for German ERASMUS students whose English proficiency upon programme-entry was upper-intermediate to advanced. L2 self-motivation was conceptualized as L2 learning effort that students reported expending towards becoming highly proficient speakers of English. Changes in how the students related to this future self, including changes in its desirability, accessibility, plausibility and in the perceived present-future self-discrepancy were also examined.

The data derive from a mixed methods study with 96 German ERASMUS students who were studying abroad in the UK for up to one academic year. All students completed C-tests of overall English language proficiency and questionnaires that inquired into their L2 learning background, L2 motivation and into aspects of the study abroad experience itself. Both instruments were administered at the onset of the study abroad period, one term into the programme and prior to the students’ return. A sub-sample of 15 students were interviewed repeatedly in order to illuminate the motivational dynamics during study abroad from an emic perspective.

The findings highlight that although becoming a highly proficient speaker of English tended to remain a strongly desired, accessible and plausible future self, most students abandoned this goal prematurely and experienced a decline in self-motivation to further improve their English after the first term abroad. The qualitative analysis of the students’ accounts shows that this decline can be plausibly explained by developments in their English self-concept that occurred in response to the study abroad experience. It emerged further that changing perceptions of cost and benefit seemed to play a key role in the students’ willingness to invest further effort into the attainment of their highly proficient ideal. The implications of these findings for research and practice will be discussed.

Keywords: self-concept, motivation, study abroad.