Language and academic success of international students at German universities

The SpraStu project

14th EALTA Conference
Sèvres, May 31-June 3, 2017
Katrin Wisniewski, University of Leipzig
Background

• increasing number of international students at German higher educational institutions (‘Hochschulen‘; in 2009: 239,143, in 2016: 340,305, DZHW/DAAD 2017: 3)

• dropout rates for BA students high (41% vs 28%, Heublein et al. 2014)

• reasons mostly unknown

• common assumption:
  • insufficient language abilities,
  • new study culture in Germany,
  • and lack of social integration (Bärenfänger et al. 2016; Heublein 2015)
Background: Some findings

- int. students claiming to have considerable language problems: 32% (2012; 2003: 19% BMBF 2013)
- insufficient knowledge of German (sem.1) according to universities: 40% (GATE Germany 2010; Heublein/Richter 2011)
- 25% cannot sufficiently follow academic lectures (Heublein/Richter 2011)
- sufficient language knowledge: 30% of students from East Asia, 37% from Africa/Middle East, 55% from Latin America
- sufficient language knowledge: 39% students of engineering, 54% mathematics & sciences, 63% humanities and economics (DZHW 2015, self-evaluations)
„Sprache und Studienerfolg“ (SpraStu) Project overview

• aim: contribution to the understanding of the role of language for academic success of international students
• longitudinal study (06/2017-10/2020)
• Universities of Leipzig & Würzburg
• participants: appr. 600 students (in 2 cohorts)
• students of economics, chemistry, German studies/German as a foreign language
• financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)
SpraStu building blocks

- Learner strategies
- Other factors
- Language ability
- Academic language

Academic success
Academic success in SpraStu

- **academic achievement** *(grades)*,
- **satisfaction*,
- **persistence*,
- attainment of learning objectives,
- acquisition of desired skills and competencies,
- postcollege performance

(York, Gibson & Rankin 2015; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek 2006)
SpraStu building blocks

- University admission language tests
- ’Proficiency’ [OnSET]
- Listening [ACTFL LPT]
- Reading [ACTFL RPT]
- Vocabulary [ITT]

Learner strategies

Other factors

Language ability

Academic language

Academic success

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SpraStu building blocks

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Academic success

- note-taking
- taking exams
- writing parts of UALT

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Why academic language?

- Language tests for university admission cannot fully mirror linguistic reality in academia (Arras et al. 2012; Bärenfänger et al. 2016; Kecker 2015; Marks 2015), more specific activities based on the use of academic language play a crucial role.

- Build a link between language testing research and research on German academic language (Becker-Mrotzek et al. 2013; Ehlich 1995, 1999; Fandrych 2010; Fandrych/Graefen 2010; Redder 2014; Tschirner et al. 2016 ...).
Academic language:
Note-taking from lectures

• “If lecturing is the instructors’ sacred cow, then lecture notetaking is the students’ pet calf.” (Titsworth & Kiewra 2004: 448)

• very common even when a variety of other supporting material is available (Arras 2012, Bärenfänger et al. 2016, Ehlich/Steets 2003)

• strategy for memorization, reproduction, further processing of lecture contents

• academic listening – reduction of complexity – mostly, reading – producing text useful for a range of purposes under time pressure (Steets 2003)


• no empirical research for L2 German
Analysis of note-taking
Provisional scheme

- notes
  - content
  - structure
  - language
  - functionality

- lectures
- interviews

- language ability
- academic listening questionnaire
- self-assessment: CEFR scale
- exam results

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integration

others

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Outlook: Some expected outcomes

• insights on building blocks, e.g., development of language ability during course of study, challenges caused by typical academic tasks...
• insights on relationships between SpraStu building blocks, e.g., language ability & academic language
• insights on importance of building blocks for academic success

→ uncover advantageous & unfavourable constellations for academic success from a language perspective
Thank you for your attention!

katrin.wisniewski@uni-leipzig.de