

Language Learner Histories: Points of Departure for University Study

Abstract Key terms and theoretical concepts on which discussion in the present volume is anchored are unpacked in this chapter, drawing on study abroad as a research field, EMI as a range of settings in which higher education is delivered and socially oriented second language acquisition as a set of theoretical principles. EMI participants enrolled on non-language-related degree courses may or may not bring with them attitudes and behaviours that facilitate the systematic attention to language generally recommended by language learning specialists and leading to noticeable gains in language proficiency. The theory-driven first section is followed by the language learning and use backgrounds of participants in the three primary research projects underpinning this volume, illustrating a range of pathways into EMI and of entry language levels.

Keywords Study abroad · SLA · ELF · Language learning histories
Proficiency gains

2.1 SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND STUDY ABROAD

2.1.1 Key Threads Revisited and a Definition

A noteworthy comment on English language development as a result of experiencing higher education through the medium of English is made by Benson et al. (2013):

Many of the Hong Kong students whom we have worked with, for example, return from a semester at an overseas university with the feeling that they are no longer ‘learners’ of English. They feel that they have become ‘users’ of English, who can best improve their competence not by studying, but simply by continuing to use the language in their everyday lives. (p. 3)

The present chapter maps various points of departure in the journey from language learner to language user that Benson et al. mention. Participants in English-medium instruction (EMI) are invited (or firmly required) to join an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course either prior to or from the start of their EMI experience. A defining aspect of EAP—thorough and comprehensive needs analysis—will ensure maximum relevance of EAP provision. At the same time, however, EAP provision may run the risk of being too narrowly framed around the academic word list (AWL) and assessed academic coursework and thus of overlooking some valuable but perhaps less rigidly academic language learning and use experiences that impact not only on academic performance as measured through summative scores but also on EMI participants’ development as confident communicators in globalised settings. A broader take on needs analysis (one of the three key threads in this volume) underpins the present volume and justifies bringing together in this second chapter insights from research into sociocultural second language acquisition (SLA) and into language development through study abroad (SA). The English language learning backgrounds of participants in the 3LU, AcLitT and exchange case study who contributed research data for the present volume are presented in this chapter, not only to contextualise discussion of findings throughout the volume but also in keeping with the principle of a more broadly defined needs analysis approach which stipulates that future experiences are enhanced if they capitalise on insights into past ones. Greater depth of understanding of language experiences in EMI, when built on an awareness of language experiences prior to EMI, can effectively lead towards strategies for enhancing formal EAP provision, as well as opportunities for language development in EMI more broadly.

The second key thread in the volume—contexts of learning and use—gains clearer contours in Sect. 2.2 in this chapter, as participants reveal significant moments and relationships related to instructed language learning prior to the start of their EMI journey, or, conversely, to unscripted encounters with other English language users. The language

learning backgrounds in themselves are not included for the purpose of establishing which research participants were ‘good’ language learners, likely to develop into ‘competent’ language users (the third key thread in this volume). Rather, they illustrate the diversity of immersion and instruction experiences that EMI participants carry with them and point towards the necessity to develop not models of instructed EAP but strategies to facilitate language enhancement that respond sensitively to emerging needs and acknowledge that university English goes beyond accumulating the kind of knowledge about formal register and specific genre conventions that they can deploy successfully in formal assessments. Discussion of the three key threads in this volume is informed by the SLA tenet that for language learning to be successful it is essential to have an appropriate combination of input and interaction. It is also underpinned by a close reading of recent SA research and draws on higher education research in relevant places.

Clarification is required on the use of the phrase ‘study abroad’. Coleman’s (2013) generous definition of ‘study abroad’, which informed the writing of this volume, is ‘simply undertaking all or part of university education abroad’ (p. 22). This includes whole-programme (‘degree’) mobility and within-programme (‘credit’) mobility, as well as arrangements which include language teaching assistantships or other types of work placement. However, the label ‘EMI participation’ is preferred in this volume to ‘study abroad’ because the latter appears to imply travelling to a country where the target language is the medium of everyday communication, whereas EMI also covers situations in which English is not necessarily the main language used outside the teaching and learning spaces on campus, participants may or may not be fluent in the language spoken outside the campus gates, and travel to a different country may or may not be involved (see also Humphreys 2017).

2.1.2 *Exploring Language Gain and Learning Practices in Study Abroad and EMI*

The example of Eva, a newcomer in an English-speaking country and employment setting, discussed in Sect. 1.2.3 was one of successful language development through purposeful language use. A similar positive experience of immersion, albeit starting from a different knowledge base, was highlighted in Benson et al.’s (2013) research with Hong Kong students studying abroad in English-speaking countries. The positive

trajectories of Eva and of Benson et al.'s research participants should, however, be read alongside DeKeyser's (2007a) more cautious account of study abroad contexts not being the ideal context for comprehensible input and for practice that leads to proceduralisation of declarative knowledge (i.e. language being used for communicative purposes rather than being 'drawn on for fill-in-the-blanks tests and other paper-and-pencil activities', p. 213) and ultimately to the automatisisation stage where rules are internalised and interaction is effortless. DeKeyser (2007b) unpacks the concept of practice starting from the premise that learners need opportunities to engage in interaction which leads to processing existing language knowledge and new language input into an increasingly more complex (and more accurate) interlanguage. He points out that 'the initial stages of proceduralisation [...] require careful, deliberate use of the relevant declarative knowledge in the execution of the target task' (p. 216) and that learners who have undergone at least some initial proceduralisation are in a stronger position to make progress. Whether this initial proceduralisation has taken place is likely to differ from learner to learner and it depends on their language learning experience prior to EMI.

The extent of language gain and learner progress, however, DeKeyser (2007a) points out, 'may be both overestimated and underestimated, depending on what is assessed and how' (p. 212). Language development is highly interactive and nonlinear. In the primary research which underpins this volume, participants' subjective views about their English took precedence over objective information about their English language qualifications. Relatedly, Copland and Garton (2011) note that students' perception of their ability to use English may have greater impact on how they engage in useful language practice and meaningful communication than any objective score of language ability and they cite research which shows that students with good academic English may have difficulty participating in social situations and interacting with their course peers due to a less strong command of social English. The artificiality of the classroom environment in which some learners have had the most substantial degree of exposure to English may have a detrimental effect on these learners' ability to step outside a formal instruction scenario. Indeed, DeKeyser (2007a) mentions, some students have the tendency to

treat native speakers like teachers, to ask for more classroom explanations while abroad, and to focus their attention during their stay overseas on the discrete items of grammar and vocabulary that can equally well be learnt at

home, while being unable to acquire the idioms, discourse skills and elements of strategic competence that study abroad is ideally suited for. (p. 214)

DeKeyser is writing about study abroad participants whose main purpose is to further develop their proficiency in the language spoken in the destination country. However, it is likely that journeys in pursuit of a higher education degree may bring up similar scenarios if participants' language learning backgrounds are predominantly of the traditional non-communicative type. Additionally, native or non-native speaker interlocutors who have not received focused language training may not have the necessary degree of language awareness to respond appropriately to the implicit metalinguistic questions that students ask. They may indeed not provide corrective feedback in face-to-face or email exchanges as this runs counter to expectations of politeness, and, if in a subject lecturer role, they may not provide developmental corrective feedback on written assignments.

Syntheses of study abroad research highlight the range of individual, background and contextual variables underpinning conclusions about the extent of gain in specific language areas (e.g. grammar, lexis, phonology, discourse), language use (e.g. accuracy, fluency, complexity) or skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing). DeKeyser (2014) emphasises that these variables, when explored through systematic juxtaposition of qualitative and quantitative research approaches within large-scale studies, can help deconstruct the 'almost magical image of a stay abroad as the one and only way to achieve high levels of proficiency' (p. 313) and formulate strategies that deal with the actual uneven progress during immersion reported across the full range of published study abroad research. In the introduction to a landmark volume 'chart[ing] a course for future research' (Kingtoner 2013, p. 2), from social and cultural angles, into language learning in study abroad, Kingtoner similarly emphasises that while findings about gains (at least modest if not always substantial) and about the development of social interaction abilities are reassuring, existing research also highlights highly noteworthy individual differences among students who return from a sojourn in a country in whose language they intend to develop proficiency. To arrive at an in-depth understanding of individual differences and draw relevant conclusions about their implications, Kingtoner argues that 'we need to frame language learning as a dialogic, situated affair that unfolds in intercultural contexts and includes significant subjective dimensions' (p. 5), echoing Coleman's view that

study abroad research can escape the narrow confines of cognitive second language acquisition (SLA) [which focuses on individual psychological processes], and see its subjects not just as language learners, but as rounded people with complex and fluid identities and relationships which frame the way they use the study abroad experience. (Coleman 2013, p. 17)

She also argues in favour of longitudinal studies and greater diversity in terms of national contexts from which participants in study abroad research originate. The present volume contributes to that debate by mapping kinds of participation available to non-native speakers in EMI settings—and the variety of ways in which these are taken up.

One determinant of success that DeKeyser (2014) foregrounds is learners' ability and willingness to engage in the 'right learning behaviours' (p. 314) although it is unclear to what extent what counts as 'right learning behaviour' can be fully explained through research and/or pedagogic lenses. The right learning behaviour in a language classroom may be rather different from what counts as 'right' in an EMI participant setting. As previously noted, the learner facet may be a stronger component than the user facet of the identity of some international students with limited exposure to English outside formal classrooms. The 'language learner' facet of EMI participants' identity is another aspect that SLA and SA research have attempted but—not surprisingly—not succeeded in fully explaining. Coleman (2013), by his own admission not a 'conventional applied linguist' (p. 17), argues that framing study abroad participants as language learners by focusing on language gains only is reductive; even in the case of students whose primary purpose is to learn the target language, what is gained from a sojourn abroad goes beyond 'enhanced TL lexis and mean length of utterance' (p. 28) to broader personal development in the areas of self-esteem, self-awareness and 'capability to operate effectively in new linguistic and cultural contexts' (p. 24). Coleman is careful to underline, however, that both identity and contexts are 'fluid, dynamic, situated, and constantly reconstructed through interaction' (p. 25).

Duff (2012) also supports a more recent strand in SLA thinking that views identity as continuously negotiated; she writes that 'with future research combining approaches to identity that include the multiple facets of learners' languages, lives, and modes of expression, SLA research will be enriched and transformed' (p. 422). She contrasts labels attached to learners of English. In one category, she lists labels that

convey ‘incomplete processes and outcomes of learning and acculturation’ (p. 410). In the opposite category, she includes ‘bilinguals, multilinguals, advanced L2 users (not “learners”), multicompetent speakers, or lingua franca speakers/users’ (p. 410). The latter group offer recognition that aspects of identity such as gender, first language and ethnicity are dynamic social constructs rather than ‘easily categorised, relatively homogenous, and static group variables’ (p. 411).

2.1.3 *Language Learning Histories*

Language learning histories prior to entering higher education can offer useful insights into how students are likely to take up opportunities for English language development, much more so than scores in language proficiency tests. The experience of fictional language teacher Aya (Cowie 2008), a ‘new teacher who recently started to teach English to 35 freshman fashion design majors at a women’s junior college in Japan’ (p. 165), tellingly illustrates this. Aya’s students showed very little interest in learning English, not opening their language textbooks when asked to do so and putting on make-up in the classroom instead of focusing on the language to be learnt. By exploring what she perceived as ‘resistant’ behaviour on the part of her students, Aya became increasingly aware that the ‘way in which different students react to different tasks seems to be reflective of their prior experience of failure and success and their self-confidence’ (p. 174), and that her own background as a successful language learner may have led her to adopt a teaching approach not sufficiently sensitive to her learners’ needs. Extrapolating this to English language development outside the language classroom in English-medium higher education, Aya’s students may well be enrolled in a higher education institution in an English-speaking country, having achieved the minimum required score for enrolment. They may or may not be there due to their own expressed desire and determination to learn English; reasons for engagement in EMI, as Waters and Leung (2014) show in their discussion of Hong Kong’s ‘educational non-elite’ (Brinton 2011, p. 29), may be linked to prior experience of failure in the more prestigious and highly competitive segments of the local education system.

Some of the students travelling abroad for an English-medium degree in an economically more powerful country may associate language learning with black-and-white, locally produced textbooks; locally trained

teachers without experience of travelling to a country where a prestige variety of English is spoken; rote memorisation; formal grammar rules; high stakes assessment; large monolingual groups; complying with or resisting knowledge transmission by an authoritative teacher figure; or, alternatively, being in an environment loosely managed by a demotivated teacher. It is not uncommon for students who perform well as language learners in classrooms in their home country to find the communicative demands in EMI settings quite challenging. At the opposite end of the continuum—glossy, colourful textbooks ranked highly by the global ELT industry; expert, mobile teachers; internationalised formal learning settings; periods of study abroad either for academic qualifications or specifically for language development; use of English while travelling abroad for leisure; exposure to a multilingual social network through family connections or work. The extent to which students are willing to put themselves in the language learner position during EMI is likely to differ depending on their previous experience of being in a language classroom or of receiving other—structured or informal—forms of tutoring. Their perceptions of their language level, either subjectively held or externally validated through a formal test, their pragmatic considerations about course workload, and strategies they use to compensate for a lower level of competence than would be ideal on the course, all contribute to this.

Language learning histories inevitably bring up a range of contexts in which learning takes place. In the first chapter of a volume exploring how languages are learnt and taught ‘beyond the classroom’, Benson (2011a) draws attention to an imbalance in research across the full range of social spaces in which learners are exposed to target languages, which nevertheless should not be interpreted as a sign that some settings take precedence over others. Benson adds that attention to the location of learning and the set of circumstances associated with that location, the extent to which learning is formalised through a qualification, the types of pedagogy involved and their corresponding modes of practice lead to greater understanding of learning (and of teaching) in ‘beyond the classroom’ settings. Overlap and cross-fertilisation across settings and modes of practice are inevitable, with fuzzy boundaries allowing insight into the complex practices and processes which culminate in language learners becoming competent language users. Study abroad as defined in the opening section of this chapter or EMI participation offer access to social spaces which are not primarily language classrooms but which entail language development. Discussion in the volume is organised around not

specific ‘standard’ variables in SLA but specific academic practices, taken as a starting point to explore how these yield opportunities for language practice.

2.1.4 *Englishes in EMI*

A mention about Englishes in EMI is required here. Participants in the research which underpins this volume (and indeed, in EMI more broadly) prepare to engage in language development experiences which would challenge the assumption, tacitly underpinning English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research, that ELF should be discussed with reference to non-Anglophone countries. The scenario described in Björkman (2011), namely that

In Swedish engineering education, it is not uncommon to have a German scholar lecturing a group of students from different language backgrounds, or for a group of Chinese, Spanish, Indian and Italian students to work on a group project, all through the medium of English. (p. 82)

would not be uncommon in an Anglophone country either, given academic mobility both of students and of staff. The range of Englishes and of interlanguages used in EMI means that what is prioritised is communicative effectiveness over lexico-grammatical accuracy (Jenkins 2013), in Wicaksono’s (2013) words, ‘proficiency in English is a practice-based, adaptive and emergent phenomenon. Lingua franca communication succeeds where the speakers are willing, and able, to monitor each other’s talk and determine mutually the appropriate grammar, lexical range and pragmatic conventions that are most likely to ensure intelligibility’ (p. 247). The range of Englishes also means that the balance between social interaction abilities and level of sophistication of language used will be more successfully judged by EMI participants themselves, taking account of the multiple subjective and sociocultural dimensions of encounters, rather than by observers with language teaching or language testing expertise. A participant in Evans and Morrison’s (2012) longitudinal research with undergraduate students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Eric, ‘saw little need to use Standard English [...] “because maybe most of our lecturers are Hong Kong people, so they would know what you are writing into the paper when you are using a Chinese style English”’ (Evans and Morrison 2012, p. 41). A participant

in Hino's (2017) research makes a similar comment with reference to a Japanese EMI context:

We already hear a lot about America and Britain, but I think it is more with Asians that Japanese are actually likely to encounter or work with... This class is very useful in getting accustomed to non-native English spoken by Asians, especially with a view to the cultural diversity of Southeast Asia including Singapore... (p. 125)

Beyond ensuring academic success, ability to communicate in English opens up employment opportunities within the global market, and professional Englishes deployed in the global market reflect the variation found among inner, outer or expanding circle English language users.

2.2 NO TWO ARE ALIKE: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING AND USE BACKGROUNDS

Journeys from learner to user in English-medium higher education start from a variety of vantage points. With specific reference to Chinese students in the UK, Li and Zhu (2013) exemplify the range of English learner/user histories that these students could potentially bring with them into the university context. A research project they conducted focused on a transnational network of students at a London university; the network included

Chris, a British-born Chinese student; Lawson, son of two Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong; and Roland, who came to the UK from mainland China when he was aged 15 years. The other two young men are Bradley, who came to the UK from mainland China with his parents when he was aged 4 years and received all his school education in England, and Stephen, who was born in China and went to New Zealand when he was aged 5 years with his parents. The family moved to Singapore when Stephen was aged 11 years and stayed there for 5 years. They came to the UK when Stephen was aged 16 years. (Li and Zhu 2013, p. 6)

As Li and Zhu illustrate, the label 'Chinese' covers a multitude of English language learning and use experiences. The heterogeneity immediately apparent in the AcLitT, Olivia and 3LU projects (the range of first languages spoken by participants included Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati, Persian, Yoruba, Dutch, German, French,

Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Hungarian and Czech) was also evident when comparing accounts by participants with a shared first language.

Another source of heterogeneity is the variety of pathways through which international students gain admission in English-medium universities (e.g. Arkoudis and Doughney 2014): language tests, pre-sessional or preparatory courses facilitating transition to university, certificates and diplomas which offer direct entry into the second year of an undergraduate degree. The extent to which these pathways offer a seamless transition into the subjects which students choose to study at university varies. Some but not all of the participants in the research on which this volume reports had been admitted onto university degree courses on the basis—partly—of standardised language scores. A study by Leung et al. (2016) is one among many which problematises the use of standardised, commercially available proficiency tests to predict student performance on university degree courses. In support of their argument, they state that ‘language competence is but one of the many intertwining components of academic participation’ (p. 57); additionally, the relationship between language proficiency test constructs and real-life communication is at best a tenuous one, given that use continuously enriches the language system and that effective communication can be achieved without necessarily adhering to standardised norms. A number of universities in English-speaking countries have adopted locally developed diagnostic post-entry language assessments (PELAs) as a means of gauging more accurately the level of ongoing support to make available to non-native speaker students (Read 2015).

With the exception of one participant settled in the UK through marriage to a British national and another who had a sibling in a similar position, AcLitT and 3LU participants fitted more standard international student profiles, with immediate family who did not match the migratory profile of those in Li and Zhu’s research. Some AcLit and 3LU participants had completed a preparatory university course (A-Levels in the UK in the case of one participant) but otherwise the great majority of participants had not experienced sustained immersion in an English-speaking context. Olivia, the exchange student, was in a similar situation with the latter. Incidentally, language levels were not assessed post-entry.

The wealth of language learning experiences that my research participants brought to their academic study is represented below, in three different formats: a synthesis of settings, approaches and strategies from the one-off postgraduate student interviews in the 3LU project; individual

vignettes for the first-year undergraduates, drawn up on the basis of what they revealed across the three AcLitT interviews; and a narrative of her experience of learning English written by Olivia, the exchange case study participant herself.

A methodological note of caution is required here. The language learner histories co-constructed during (and on the basis of) the interviews contain a mix of factual detail and subjective interpretation. As any research narrative, they reveal what research participants believed to be true at a given point in time and may change once participants have undergone different experiences. Students' evaluation of their own performance in the events they recounted may or may not be accurate from an external observer's point of view. However, the focus of the research was not to gauge objective improvement but to understand how the language development strategies students draw on in the EMI context build on or deviate from past language learning experience. The accounts provided in this volume are necessarily provisional and incomplete, but reveal what participants themselves believe to be relevant experience in the run-up to and during university study. In the present chapter, the histories provide some context against which students' language-related experience on the course can be understood in greater depth. The label 'histories' is loosely applied here. Benson (2011b) prefers the concept 'language learning careers', which, he argues, has more analytical purchase as it is linked with 'broader process of socialisation' (p. 547), both institutional and informal, and with identity development. Language learning careers are built on critical incidents, i.e. 'incidents that were recounted in order to account for a change of direction or a transition between phases in the learning career' (p. 548). Benson himself, however, cautions that 'the capacity to articulate a narrative of one's language learning career is variable' (p. 552). Rather than impose the concept of 'careers' onto the data, the decision was made to develop analytical tools in dialogue with the data and present the data in a format that best captured participants' own perceptions of their trajectories in real time.

2.2.1 *Journeying Towards a Postgraduate Degree (The 3LU Project)*

All twenty-one postgraduate students who took part in the 3LU project had learnt English in the formal education system, with most starting in primary school. Participants' degree of exposure to English prior to their UK course varied widely. At one end of the continuum, Xanthe,

who came from a small town in China, where there were ‘hardly any native speakers’ and books in English were expensive. She felt embarrassed to use English when talking to her Chinese classmates in school; her exposure to English was limited to classroom settings and was very much examination-driven. There was less urgency for Xanthe to continue to develop her English during her undergraduate degree in China because of a lack of examination-linked external motivation. To gain admission on the postgraduate course, Xanthe made several attempts to pass IELTS, using a combination of self-study and input from ‘language agency’ tutors, and eventually enrolled on a pre-session course which enabled her to become a postgraduate student on her chosen master’s.

At the other end of the continuum, Carla. Carla attended an English-medium high school in a top-tier Chinese city, where she was taught by teachers from a range of different countries. Extra-curricular activities organised by the school and holidays abroad with her family meant she was exposed to social English and many different accents. She obtained A-Levels and passed the IELTS test. Carla completed her undergraduate degree in the UK in a subject indirectly related to the master’s course. While an undergraduate student, she acquired a British boyfriend and gained access, through her hobby, to a professional network which involved sponsored travelling across the UK and using English in a range of non-academic contexts.

In between these two contrasting cases, the postgraduate students who took part in the 3LU project had a range of experience with English, as follows: completing an undergraduate degree in English in their home country; some level of work experience in a setting where English was used alongside local languages or in a multinational workplace; some work experience but no education experience in an Anglophone country; completing a different, unrelated master’s at another UK university; substantial experience of travelling to the UK due to a parent’s professional links with this country.

Some of the postgraduate participants had grown up in nuclear or extended households in which at least one other family member spoke English. Antonia’s aunt was an English language teacher with a Ph.D. in English literature. Ella’s father travelled to the UK regularly for professional purposes. Bella’s sister worked in the UK in the same field that Bella was studying for a master’s. Some participants came from an aspirational background where English was held in high esteem but had reached a competent level as English language user not through literacy

support provided by their own families (e.g. the parents of two participants could not read or write in their own language) but through access, sometimes sponsored by the community in which they grew up, to formal education as in the case of Harry.

2.2.2 *Journeys Prior to Embarking on First-Year Undergraduate Study (The AcLitT Project)*

Participant A

Participant A studied English in an Asian country where the American variety of English is more widely taught. Her experience of language classes in the formal schooling system consisted mainly of learning grammar and lists of vocabulary, with limited skills practice. With encouragement and support from her mother to develop her English, Participant A attended a language-oriented high school as well as supplementary private classes, the latter including a group of friends and family members. Prior to arriving in the UK, Participant A had been taught English both by local and by native speaker teachers.

In the UK, Participant A completed a preparatory course for university study which comprised of both subject and language classes. Her greatest gain from her preparatory year was confidence in her ability to deliver presentations in English. The variety of English to which Participant A was exposed prior to her arrival meant that she needed to spend some time adjusting to a different range of vocabulary for day-to-day life (e.g. *aubergine* instead of *eggplant*). However, in terms of using language in general, Participant A felt quite comfortable.

Participant B

Participant B believed that speaking a language is an essential part of the language learning process. He did not use English to communicate with his immediate family. He was inspired by an English language teacher in his high school to pick an accent and use it consistently in order to become a competent speaker of the language. Consistent accent and a grasp of the three main tenses in English were the building blocks of his identity as a competent language user. A move to a larger city with greater educational opportunities when he began his secondary schooling meant that Participant B had access to a wider range of language teaching materials and activities, such as reading newspapers in English. A combination of circumstances on the test day meant that Participant B did not receive the required score in the required language examination

for university entrance, and he completed a preparatory course in the UK prior to starting his university degree. Language study was a component of the preparatory course but focused mainly on preparing for a language examination. On arrival in the UK, Participant B felt that his 'basic English' (i.e. everyday language use) was OK.

Participant C

Participant C was a keen traveller and language learner. He completed his secondary education in a private school where English was used as a medium of instruction for most subjects. He then studied on a preparatory course in the UK to achieve the required academic credentials for university enrolment. In between his secondary schooling and the preparatory course, he spent approximately two years in a German-speaking country, learning the language with a view to studying there, but eventually settled on academic study in the UK. His long-term goal was to secure a position in an international company using English as a medium of communication. At the beginning of the project, Participant C described his language level as 'not bad for an international student [compared to] university standard study level in the UK'.

Participant D

Participant D grew up in a bilingual household. Her parents relocated from Asia to Europe. Participant D spoke two Asian languages and four European ones, as well as having some knowledge of Latin, which was compulsory in school. While in high school, Participant D spent about six weeks in Canada as an exchange student and visited the UK briefly about a year before the start of her degree course. She did not attend private language classes. She did not have to take a separate language test for university entry because her end-of-school examination provided sufficient proof of language competence, nor did she undertake any special preparatory language classes.

Participant D did not particularly enjoy grammar in school, but found English grammar easier than that of other languages she had learnt. In the final two years of high school, she was not taught new grammar but recycled language previously taught, stayed in touch with friends she had made in Canada and absorbed language through reading/listening for pleasure rather than formal language study. She enjoyed her language classes in high school, where she participated in general discussion about books and films or about current affairs.

Participant E

Participant E attended a high school with intensive English classes and also had a private tutor who supplemented the in-class material and checked Participant E's homework. This was because classes are fairly large in her country and the tutors cannot pay enough individual attention to students, especially in regard to productive skills (writing and speaking). Some of the language classes in school were aimed specifically at preparing students for a Cambridge English language examination (Cambridge Advanced). In school, Participant E learnt many 'fancy expressions' (e.g. phrasal verbs which she currently does not consciously use and does not hear spoken around her). She did not do any specific preparation for university language-wise.

Participant F

Participant F started learning English in preschool. As a teenager, she attended a language camp in her country and had the opportunity to talk to native speakers, which kindled her enthusiasm for English. She then travelled to Portugal as an exchange student for a year of secondary education, where she used ELF because at the beginning of the exchange, she did not speak any Portuguese. On her return, she continued to speak English with the exchange students that her own school was hosting. In between her secondary education and starting a university degree in the UK, she worked for a few years in a café frequented by foreign tourists and then in a company where ELF was used as the main medium of communication. She admitted to probably speaking English more than her native language in the past few years. To prepare for university, she spent a summer watching British films to familiarise herself with the accent. Participant F described herself as an enthusiastic language learner and felt she learnt better from other people than from books. At the start of the project, she was aware that she had reached a level where 'it's hard to find the right resources to get better'.

Participant G

Participant G completed her final high school year in England and took her examinations there, after which she returned to her home country to complete her studies in her national school system as well. This was followed by a gap year as an au pair in a foreign, non-English-speaking country, where she also taught English to the children she was looking

after. Participant G was in a long-term relationship in which she used English for communication, as her partner spoke a different first language from hers. To meet language requirements for university entry, Participant G took the Cambridge Advanced examination about a year prior to starting her degree. She attended preparatory classes offered by her high school for the examination, to familiarise herself with the test format. Participant G's secondary school curriculum included Latin and ancient Greek classes, which helped her with understanding academic English vocabulary. Participant G liked learning grammar and was a keen language learner in general, interested in word etymology and the meanings of idioms and phrases. She felt confident about her language level at the beginning of her university course.

2.2.3 *Embarking on a Mid-Degree Academic Exchange* *Experience: Olivia*

Olivia joined the second year of an Art and Design degree, having already completed two years of undergraduate study in her own country, Brazil. She described her previous experience of language learning and her first impressions of language use in the UK as follows:

Before I came to the UK this year, I had already finished my English advanced course two years ago. But in my very first week here, I had some trouble to communicate with people, till the point that in the first lunch to meet the design teachers staff I almost left the room. I felt very embarrassed when everyone was laughing and smiling and I had no idea what they were talking about. At least now, one and a half months later, I feel that my English skills have never been better.

Back in Brazil, I couldn't watch a whole movie without feeling insecure or lost, or even understanding some songs lyrics. Nowadays, even when I get a little lost in translation, I feel able to catch the essence of what people are saying. I do struggle a bit on understanding different accents—foreign or not. And people here also find it a little difficult to understand me sometimes. But, predictably, I notice that it's harder to understand what people say in a restaurant than in an university environment.

Sometimes I feel my English is very good, but there are occasions when I make some little silly mistakes, such as say 'teachers doesn't'. And when I make my first mistake, I can't help making other ones, because I get a little nervous and feeling that people find me stupid. That's just because I

know my English level, and I pressure myself for knowing I could be doing just a tiny bit better. There are also some pretty rare times when someone speaks to me and I understand every word, but not the meaning of the whole sentence. And since I feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat more than one time, if I don't understand, I leave it that way. But I have learned here that I do not need to have the most perfect English; I just need to make myself understandable.

As for the materials for language learning and teaching, I think every single one of them has its value—CDs, TV, reading news and/or books, learning song lyrics... Because in the end, every person is unique, so some of the materials will fit some people, but won't fit other ones. But for me, my favorite techniques are those which explore some more 'reality', where you can experience 'real' language—not that recordings with a trained actress. 'Real' speakers, native or not (this last one only after you've achieved a certain learning level. It makes the student feel better when he notices it's not a problem to have an accent). [Olivia written piece 1]

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