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Do Students Make More Pronunciation Improvements Living in German Foreign Language Housing than Studying In Class?

Immersion environments, including study abroad, internship and foreign language housing environments, are believed to facilitate more language improvements than traditional classroom settings. While a number of studies examining German have demonstrated greater pronunciation gains for study abroad (e.g., O'Brien, 2003), less is known about the benefits of foreign language residences on university campuses. Moreover, studies examining immersion experiences have typically focused on improvements to global pronunciation (e.g., Smith & Aten, 2009) or they have examined primarily vowels (cf. O'Brien, 2003 for vowels) but not vowels and consonants. Although Hall (2003) has stated that consonants play a more critical role in German, most research has focused on the acquisition of German vowels since they mark critical grammatical contrasts, e.g., plurals *Vater-Väter* 'father-fathers' or subjunctive *möchte-möchte* 'liked-would like'.

This study builds on these aspects to determine 1) if the limited immersion experience of foreign language housing facilitates greater pronunciation improvements than studying in the foreign language classroom alone; and 2) whether students are more likely to improve their vowels or consonants. To answer these questions, we analyzed recordings from 7 students living in the German House and 7 students studying German in-class who were matched to the German House students in terms of language experience. Subjects were recorded during the 2nd week of the semester and again 11 weeks later reading 'The Sun and the Wind' as well as 80 sentences including the 8 German rounded vowels, i.e., /o:/, /ø:/, /u:/, /y:/, /ʊ/, /Y/, /ɔ/, and /oe/, and consonants known to be difficult for English speakers learning German, namely /ts/ *zehn* 'ten', <s>+ consonant produced as [ʃ], e.g., *Sport, Stein*, [x] *noch* 'still', [ç] *ich* 'I', and <g> *fertig* 'finished'. Vowels and consonants were analysed acoustically and compared against native German speakers' productions. While preliminary results suggest that students living in the German House do make more gains in pronunciation, the full results will elucidate the nature of the improvements during a short term immersion experience in terms of both vowels and consonants. We will note which sounds in particular undergo more improvement than others. Findings will have implications for program development to help directors know which sounds will need more practice to help students make improvements beyond what an immersion experience can provide and which sounds may need more help for students studying in an in-class setting alone.