

Abstract (english)

Martina Kienberger:

*Using the potential of potential vocabulary. L3 German students' strategy use to infer meaning of unknown words at Spanish Universities*

Processes and strategies in vocabulary learning are an important field of research in second and third language (L3) acquisition and teaching. A promising concept to increase learners' ability to acquire new vocabulary during language contact is the so called "potential vocabulary": It refers to foreign words which are unknown to the learner, but yet can be recognized in the moment of first contact. Learners are able to infer their meaning by relying on first or other language knowledge, world knowledge etc. According to learner strategy research, learners' strategy use is very individual and depends on various factors. Studies on the actual use of strategies in specific situations have shown that metacognitive control and coordination of a range of different strategies is necessary in order to successfully infer the meaning of unknown words. The awareness and perceived application of inferencing strategies among learners has been investigated so far mainly as part of large-scale studies on vocabulary strategies in general, which suggest the importance of using reference sources and guessing from context.

This PhD project investigates how foreign language students of German as a L3 at Spanish Universities are using strategies to infer the meaning of unknown words in written texts, according to their statements. This might help to lead us to a better understanding of how multilingual university students use inferencing techniques and how they can be supported in this task. To this end, between 2017 and 2019, German students at Spanish Universities were questioned in an online survey about their perceived strategy use and contexts of strategy acquisition. After piloting the research instrument

developed by the author at the University of Salamanca (n = 68) and analyzing the results, the improved questionnaire was distributed to students in 19 Spanish Universities to collect data on a nationwide scale (n = 333). In addition, German university teachers (n = 53) were questioned about their observations on students' strategy use as well as the contents and methods of strategy instruction. For the analysis, several statistical methods including factorial analysis, multivariate analysis of variance and biplot as well as machine learning techniques (cluster analysis, random forest) were used. The results show the importance of inferencing strategies for the surveyed students and teachers. Learners at Spanish Universities tend to use them frequently, although there are differences with regard to individual strategies and among learners. The significant individual differences can be attributed to a combination of factors, whereby in addition to the language level, contexts and methods of strategy acquisition seem to play an essential role.