



Australian
National
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Upcoming Seminar

ANU Language Teaching Forum

Monday 27 August 2018, 4.15 – 5.15 pm
Room W3.03, Level 3, Baldessin Precinct Building #110, ANU

Speaker: Yanyin Zhang, CHL, CAP, ANU

The impact of context on early foreign language learning



It is a common belief that the best way to learn a foreign language is to go to the country where the language is spoken, because an immersive environment facilitates faster and better learning outcome. Research studies indeed showed an advantage of the target language context for improved vocabulary, communicative skills, and pragmatic knowledge. However, no advantage was found for grammar learning. Few studies, if any, focused on *ab-initio* learners. The question, therefore, is: What impact do learning contexts have for beginners?

In this talk, I will present two longitudinal studies, carried out in China and in Australia respectively. The learners were absolute beginners enrolled in the first-year university Chinese language courses. Four Chinese word order structures, ranging from the basic SVO order to the Object-topicalization orders, were examined in terms of their acquisition rates and learning sequence in the target language (China) and foreign language (Australia) contexts.

The results showed that learning contexts had no impact on the sequence of acquisition: the four word order structures emerged in the same sequence in both groups of learners. The impact, however, was found in the learning rate. The foreign language group (Australia) progressed faster than the target language group (China) even though it received three times less instructional hours and nearly zero natural input outside the classroom.

These findings confirm previous research that the way grammatical structures develop is impervious to external factors, and that foreign language context is not inferior, particularly for beginners. The findings have implications for both language teachers, language learners (and their parents), and managers of exchange and mobility programs.

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This forum is jointly coordinated by the College of Arts & Social Sciences (the School of Literature, Languages & Linguistics and the Centre for Arab & Islamic Studies) and the College of Asia & the Pacific (School of Culture, History & Language).

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