Der Schulerwerb von Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Eine empirische Untersuchung am Beispiel der italienischsprachigen Schweiz

By Elisabetta Terrasi-Haufe

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General characterization of the book

Terrasi-Haufe presents a study on the acquisition of German as a foreign language (GFL) in the school context of Ticino, an Italian-speaking region of Switzerland. The book title promises the reader an empirical study, and, indeed, the author has collected a remarkable corpus of written and spoken data from students at the end of their middle school, their vocational school and their high school careers. She presents her analysis of the transcribed and coded empirical data in a most informative and clear manner, using 35 tables and 40 statistical diagrams as well as numerous summaries.

This book on GFL acquisition is inspired, among others, by three previous Swiss studies: the analysis of the Zurich corpus of German native speakers' texts (see Sieber 1994), Schneider & North's (2000) work on language assessment, and especially Diehl et al.'s (2000) study on German grammar acquisition by French-speaking Swiss students in a school context. With its focus on evaluation, Terrasi-Haufe's study can be characterized as a linguistic corpus analysis of GFL acquisition data conducted to gain insights for improving teaching methods and school curricula. The author herself speaks of "taking inventory" (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:3) of the GFL knowledge of students at transition points in Ticino's school system. Therefore, the intended target audience seems to consist of three groups in particular: (1) researchers in the field of second language acquisition in general, and particular of GFL acquisition, (2) teachers of GFL and (3) administrators responsible for organizing language education at the middle, vocational, and high school level.

Summary

After a brief overview over the organization of the book in chapter 1, chapter 2 features a description of the research project. As important goals of the study the author points out insights about general and individual developmental sequences as well as about the interaction in the development of oral and written skills (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:5). She goes on to describe the principles according to which she chose a preliminary sample of roughly 440 students and according to which she reduced these data to a representative sample of 60 subjects. This chapter also describes the instruments and schedules used for collecting data, i.e. four written texts per student (letters, journal entries, stories, and articles) and three videotaped oral presentations and subsequent discussions per student (reports on private experiences, movies, books, and projects). Finally, chapter 2 also reports on features of the employed software CLAN (see CHILDES, no year given) and on two key aspects of data entry, namely a transcription system for the oral data that the author developed herself (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:19) and a system used for coding data on five different levels. These coding levels involve a data analysis of

(1) specific morphological elements – based on the analysis tools of the Zurich corpus (Sieber 1994)

(2) the parts of speech – based on the Duden classification (Drosdowski et al. 1995)

(3) the parts of a sentence and of compound sentences – based on the Duden grammar as well (Drosdowski et al. 1995)

(4) the linguistic action – based on a classification developed by Terrasi-Haufe using Austin (1962), Searle (1975), and Brandt et al. (1992, no reference given) and finally

(5) orthographic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, lexical and pragmatic errors – based on the analysis tools of the Zurich corpus (Sieber 1994)

Chapter 3 proceeds to present the results of the qualitative and quantitative data analyses. For each of the three corpora of middle school, vocational school, and high school student data, this chapter provides detailed results of morphosyntactic, lexematic, and pragmatic analyses as well as of average sentence and text lengths. Some observations from Terrasi-Haufe's study of verb forms shall serve to illustrate the nature of her findings (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:72). Students in grade 4 of the middle school are in the process of acquiring the past tense as well as the dual verb forms of modal verb/infinitive and perfect tense (*German* "Perfekt") as well as the past tense. At the end of their vocational school years, the majority of students are still acquiring participles and past tense forms although, in this heterogenous corpus, some are still struggling with subject-verb congruency while others are already dealing with subjunctive II (*German* "Konjunktiv II"). In grades 11 and 12, high school

students are mainly acquiring the passive voice and the different functions of the verb "werden". The author also investigates general developmental tendencies concerning the nominal and pronominal declension system, syntactic complexity, and the use of parts of speech (verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, particles, conjunctions, and prepositions). In her pragmatic analysis, she investigates the range of linguistic actions used by the students, their use of procedures as defined by Ehlich (see Ehlich 1991) and their use of the modal field. She also assesses the coherence of their productions, topic development, degree of explicitness and recipient guidance as well as aspects of their oral production (e.g. eye contact or gestures).

Chapter 4 summarizes the results from a different perspective. The author reviews her most important insights according to student population and thus traces a reconstructed general developmental path. A minute exemplary detail from the pragmatic domain may illustrate Terrasi-Haufe's encompassing approach: Whereas students' linguistic actions at the end of middle school mainly consist of assertions, reports, and cognitive reasoning, their repertoire of assertive actions doubles in the first year of high school, and they begin to express attitudes (such as regret, astonishment and doubt) and to direct their hearers (with linguistic actions such as requests, advice, recommendations) (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:180ff.).

With its focus on student populations, chapter 4 provides a transition to the practical conclusions and recommendations for GFL instruction featured in chapter 5. A result particularly noteworthy to education administrators is that middle school students in Terrasi-Haufe's corpus do not meet the goals defined in the school curricula for this level. In terms of teaching methodology, the author's recommendations are primarily concerned with increasing explicit instruction on functional aspects of grammar and using examples of authentic communication in the classroom. The book also contains an appendix of 79 pages showing the instruments used for data collection, transcription, and analysis.

Evaluation

Among the many strong points of this analysis, three aspects are to be mentioned in particular. First of all, Terrasi-Haufe has taken great care in creating a representative sample. To ensure a high-quality data base, she collected data from roughly 440 students and reduced these in two steps. In a first step, she selected only complete or virtually complete data series. This approach appears especially adequate since, for one of her three corpora, she followed students throughout their transition from middle school to different vocational schools and

high schools – an undertaking that, by its very nature, is otherwise prone to produce incomplete data. In a second step, she reduced her data series by randomly selecting a sample of 60 students. By collecting a set of data so much larger than the intended final corpus size, she was able to create a data base that is not only large for a study conducted by a single researcher, but also unusually representative.

Secondly, Terrasi-Haufe's analysis is not only extremely labor-intensive in terms of transcribing and coding the data, but also highly ambitious in its wide scope. As noted above, it goes beyond a description of morphosyntactical and lexical development to include pragmatic observations. To the reviewer, this approach seems highly promising for future research in the field of second language acquisition if it is conducted with instructional aims in mind. From this perspective, Terrasi-Haufe's work can be considered as pioneering and will hopefully prove highly productive in generating further research into this important field.

A third point worthy of praise is to be mentioned only very briefly, but might serve as an invitation to read Terrasi-Haufe's work: The author presents her findings in a clear and precise manner. In addition to the wealth of detailed information it offers, the book is well-paced and straight-forward. Its high degree of accessibility deserves a wide audience.

Some issues that the reviewer expects to be raised in discussions of this book are the validity of the oral data, the quality of the coding categories, and the theoretical implications of the empirical findings. With respect to the oral data, concerns about the validity will have to be addressed as Terrasi-Haufe (2004:174) notes that 40% of subjects read aloud their prepared presentations and another 25% of subjects delivered their presentations in a manner that it appeared to the researcher that they had memorized them. This means that, to a large extent, the oral corpus does not consist of spontaneous speech. Furthermore, parents or friends might have helped the subjects with their task of preparing the reports.

In terms of data analysis, the quality of any corpus analysis depends to a great extent on the quality of the coding categories used. Therefore it comes as a surprise that Terrasi-Haufe does not discuss her specific reasons for relying extensively on the Duden grammar and the coding system developed for native speakers of German in Sieber (1994). As both of these coding bases are strongly norm-oriented, one wonders whether the author simply felt no need to reflect on the adequacy of their underlying assumptions. Also, coding is not a mechanic, but a highly interpretive analytic process (see Rehbein & Mazeland 1991). Terrasi-Haufe herself acknowledges problems with applying the norm-oriented coding categories (p. 19) and the creation of more or less spontaneous pragmatic categories during the coding process (p. 29).

The reviewer thus feels that several aspects of what the author merely calls "data entry" would have deserved more explicit reflection. Otherwise, the critical reader might experience difficulty in following specific coding decisions such as, for example, the coding of an omission of the subject in the following learner utterance "*ich denke* [...], *dass* [...] *ist nicht schwierig* [...], *einen Beschluss zu fassen* [...]" (Terrasi-Haufe 2004:20) or the decision to code norm-deviant realizations such as "*auf ein genetisch Tomaten*" (Terrasi-Haufe 2004:25) as masculine (thereby ignoring the option of neuter) on the basis that the first language, Italian, does not have a neuter gender. Finally, when Terrasi-Haufe develops a coding system for linguistic actions, similar concerns arise in that she does not spell out her underlying theoretical assumptions. For example, she appears to conceptualize her pragmatic analysis as an additional level added on to her lexical and morpho-syntactical research, even though this approach is not easily reconciled with the functional-pragmatic framework of Ehlich or Redder whose work she relies on.

This leads us to a third point worthy of future discussion. A more explicit interpretation of the empirical findings in terms of theory development could prove of great interest to researchers in the field of second language acquisition. Terrasi-Haufe does establish some explicit connections of her rich description to other studies. However, it is generally not her priority to interpret her findings with respect to underlying processes or current theories of second language acquisition such as, for example, Pienemann's (1998) processability theory, although this particular theory is highly relevant to her discussion of sequencing instruction according to acquisitional stages (see Terrasi-Haufe 2004:197). Readers who do not go along with her implicit assumption that the target language is the only option to use as a basis for the analysis of the data might remain curious about her explicit concept of learner language. In further discussion, the reviewer would welcome attempts to spell out more clearly such theoretical concepts underlying the coding categories and the discussions and to position the rich empirical description within the wider context of second language acquisition theory (e.g. Doughty & Long 2003) more explicitly. It goes without saying that all bibliographical references of such theoretical discussion need to be complete as well as correct, which unfortunately is not the case.

Conclusion

Terrasi-Haufe's work is a valuable contribution to empirical research on GFL acquisition. It is based on a well-composed corpus, relies on extensive coding of empirical data, and uses

powerful software for the data analysis. However, its wide scope of analysis requires some, arguably problematic, compromises concerning the categories employed, and this study thus comes close to testing the boundaries of what a one-person research project can accomplish. Hopefully, therefore, this important book will motivate further collaborative research to pursue the goal of pragmatic analyses of second language acquisition in school contexts which Terrasi-Haufe has clearly established and which is so highly relevant to reforms in language education.

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