

Second language acquisition through the seasons: A dissertation diary

Autumn

The start of the academic year. A new city, new modules, and a new dissertation. To think that the final submission deadline for my Master's degree is 1st September 2025, a whole year away, feels like I have an infinite amount of time.

I spend the few first weeks of the semester essentially ignoring the dissertation, instead focusing on choosing which MA modules I am most interested in. I know that I want to ground my dissertation in exploring how individuals acquire a second language, and I am optimistic that my semester one modules will help me to narrow this enormous topic down further.

As the semester progresses, so too do my ideas for the dissertation, resulting in a mind-map of eight different topic ideas all within the field of second language acquisition. But instead of feeling overwhelmed, I'm having fun! Time is on my side, and I am enjoying the academic freedom to research different ideas, learn about various theories, and consider how I might contribute to the research gap in this field.

One of my modules, Research Methods, is proving to be extremely helpful in helping me to figure out the methods involved in my dissertation. By reading week, I have now decided that I want to conduct an experimental project which involves my own data collection. I don't yet have a research question, a title, or even a specific focus, but for now I'll take this small advancement as a little win.

Winter

December. The season of colds, coughs, and a crazy number of deadlines...I have four essays to write over the next four weeks. Merry Christmas.

I had tricked myself into thinking that by this point at the end of semester one I would have a clear direction for where I plan to go with my dissertation. Instead, the essays have to take priority, and the dissertation will therefore have to wait until the New Year. A small part of me is panicking slightly, but the fear of four essays quickly supersedes that. Cue my new student residence: the library. Sitting in silence with a friend, each working on our own essays, is far more productive than working alone from the comforts of my flat where there is unlimited access to naps and food.

Are you in the library tonight? 17:15 ✓✓

When are you leaving the library? 16:20 ✓✓

Will you stay late in the library? 15:01 ✓✓

But I should go to the library too!! 12:30 ✓✓

Shall we also work in the library too? 14:23 ✓✓

I am outside library haha 18:12 ✓✓

I will come to the library tonight with you!!📖 13:20 ✓✓

Are you in the library at the moment? 17:42 ✓✓

With January comes the start of a new year and new dissertation resolutions: to read one journal article or book chapter a week. It sounds realistic and achievable, and I start the new semester feeling confident that I now have a plan to start addressing the dissertation. I make a list of frequently cited journals on language acquisition as well as a list of books, then head to the library to borrow as many as I can find on the topic!



About three weeks into the semester, I have made really good progress. I have now decided that my dissertation will explore the acquisition of a particular speech sound amongst English speakers learning Spanish as their second language through an acoustic analysis of their productions across different task types. I attend my second meeting with my supervisor whose response to my proposed idea is “that sounds really cool!” – another win! This feels like a huge relief as I now have a specific topic area to focus my readings on.

What isn't quite so reassuring is the daunting prospect of the ethics process. I decide that my most realistic option in terms of recruitment is undergraduate students learning Spanish at the university. Whilst in an ideal world I would like to have looked at age as a variable by exploring speech production amongst children and young adults, the practicality of recruiting these participants and the extremely complicated paperwork involved makes me rapidly reconsider this option.

I spend the next couple of weeks filling in every tiny detail on the ethics form, explaining exactly what will be expected of my participants, why, when, and where. This process is certainly a lot more intense than I had first envisaged!

Spring

After spending a substantial amount of time on my ethics application, I was highly disappointed to receive an email telling me it had been rejected. It is now the end of February, and I am starting to panic slightly that I will run out of time for data collection if it isn't approved soon. However, after several amendments to the wording and consideration about data storage, I resubmit. After an anxious week waiting and constantly checking my emails, I am relieved to finally receive the news that my project can officially go ahead.

I start March with the task of recruiting undergraduate students to take part in my study....easier said than done! With a lot of help and persuasion from their Spanish tutors (thank you Sandra, Bea, and Susana!), I manage to find enough volunteers to take part. I actually find myself really enjoying the data collection process! I like the control over the fact that I am relying on my own primary data for this dissertation, rather than exploring secondary data that somebody else has published. Yes, the ethics process was stressful and long, but I do think it is worth it to experience the fun of collecting and analysing your own data.

With the arrival of the Easter holidays, I go home for a few days and meet up with a friend who works in finance. We started talking about my Master's and he asked a very simplistic yet potentially difficult question: "What's your dissertation about?". At first, I didn't know what to say... "It's about language learning" seemed way too broad, but "It's about allophonic acquisition of the lateral segment which isn't velarised in second language learners of Spanish" seemed way too specific! Instead, I tried hard to explain my project in everyday language: "It's about how people acquire a second language, specifically the sound L. I am looking at how English speakers of Spanish produce this sound in both of their languages because there are interesting differences to explore there". My friend seemed genuinely interested and I was delighted that he understood my topic as a non-linguist! Afterwards, it dawned on me that I know more about this project than I had initially thought, giving me a confidence boost that I didn't know I needed. As Albert Einstein once said:

If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

Summer

As the end of semester two starts to draw to a close, I try to finish the data collection as quickly as I can before the undergraduate students start to leave campus for the summer break. The dissertation then has to take a backseat as I have several end of semester assignments to complete for my modules. I have a final in-person meeting with my supervisor and feel optimistic about the upcoming plan for the data analysis.

When June arrives, I move out of my Manchester accommodation, say a final goodbye to my friends, many of whom are from abroad, and try to prepare myself for the thought of working in isolation on my dissertation. Unfortunately, it is a feeling that becomes a reality. As June turns to July and subsequently the start of August, every day is exactly the same sat in front of my laptop writing the dissertation. It is much harder than I envisaged without any social connections or fun events to look forward to. I am really missing the library study sessions with my friends!

I decide to start taking one day at a time and set weekly and daily goals to keep myself on track for the September deadline. I map out the exact number of days I have left until submission and how many chapters still to write, then allocate these accordingly. I feel more in control, and it also gives me a wonderful excuse to get my highlighters back out and colour-coordinate everything!

By the end of August, I have reached nearly 15,000 words...far too many for the 12,000-word limit! Somehow deciding what to take out feels far more difficult than deciding what content to include. I am conscious of how close the deadline is and become even more aware of how quickly time seems to pass by. I start setting 60-minute timers with the goal of cutting out 100 words...and it seems to work! Gradually I start to reduce more and more of my dissertation and finish with a final word count of 11,800. I spend the final few days checking my grammar, the connections between paragraphs, and tidying up my references then decide to leave the dissertation for a whole afternoon and look over it one final time the following morning.

As August transitions into September, my dissertation and Master's journey comes to an end. I log into Canvas, take a deep breath, and press submit!

➤ [Submit Dissertation HERE](#) by 14:00 (GMT/BST) 1st September 2025

✓ **Submitted!**