

Assignment 1 – EDUC6281 – A critical comparison of empirical research articles

The effects of transition on languages learning

Introduction:

In this critique, four empirical research articles will be compared, looking primarily at questions of methodology and validity. The four articles are tied together by the themes of languages learning and transition. Transition from one stage to another is always a difficult time in a student's school career, with many challenges, particularly for learners of modern foreign languages (MFL) (Jones & Coffey, 2006; Board & Tinsley, 2014; Burstall, et al, 1974). Careful planning and progression are essential, to avoid duplication or discontinuity, which can lead to demotivation (Galton, *et al.*, 1999 and 2003).

The first article (Chambers, 2015) is a report on how schools in a region in Germany deal with the challenges posed by transition, particularly in relation to the learning of English as a foreign language. The second (Jones, 2010) looks at the extent to which students with successfully embedded Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices in primary school are able to use their skills towards their languages learning in Year 7 and beyond. The third article (Graham, 2006) looks at students of French aged 16-18, and the self-image they have as language learners. The final article (Busse & Williams, 2010) explores how students are able to maintain their interest in and passion for studying German beyond school to university level.

Methodologies – paradigms and design:

According to Punch and Oancea (2014: 3) qualitative research studies cases and processes, whereas quantitative researchers conceptualise the world in terms of measurable variables. As will be evident from the Introduction above, the themes explored by these research articles lend themselves more readily to a qualitative research approach, as they are particular cases. However, the studies did not all restrict themselves to purely qualitative methods.

Chambers (2015), examining the variables influencing German teachers of English with regard to their preparatory work for pupils' transition from primary to secondary school, adopts a strongly interpretivist approach, conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews with 25 teachers of English, from eight different secondary schools (six *Gymnasien* and two *Realschulen*) in the Saxony-Anhalt region. Framing the questioning around four main themes on the topic of transition, Chambers' strongly qualitative approach is appropriate for the task (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 114). According to Cohen, *et al.* (2007: 97, 353) and Punch and Oancea (2014: 183), semi-structured interviews offer a degree of flexibility to adapt questions, while retaining a clear focus – a compromise between structured, standardised interviews (such as a survey) at one end of the continuum, and unstructured in-depth interviews at the other. There was a range of group and one-to-one interviews, and the interview schedule is included in an appendix, offering both increased transparency (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220) and evidence of construct validity (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 184). After numerous re-readings, qualitative evaluation identified key themes inductively, leading to a coding framework for further, more detailed analysis (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 368).

Jones (2010), also adopts an interpretivist approach, but uses a wider range of quantitative methods than Chambers (2015). This study involved tracking a group of 12 students – six from each of two mixed state primary schools in Jersey – for two-and-a-half years, from the end of Year 6, into the beginning of Year 8.

The tracking process took the form of observations of the students and of their teachers, of interviews with teachers, and of group discussions with pupils, again based on a semi-structured interview format (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 97, 353; Punch & Oancea, 2014: 183). With observations, just as with interviews, it is possible to place them on a structure continuum, with highly structured quantitative approaches with pre-developed observation schedules at one end, and with less structured, more qualitative open-ended observations at the other (Punch & Oancea, 2014): 195-6). The observations carried out by Jones (2010) had a clear focus – the identification of formative practices and the observation of pupil interactions and reactions – but no clearly defined schedule, setting them towards the qualitative end of the continuum (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 398). With regard to the semi-structured interviews, according to Morgan (1999: 6, cited in Jones, 2010), ‘In essence, it is the researcher’s interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction’. All interviews were recorded, and the transcripts were then coded, progressively focussing on key issues as they emerged (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 225-228).

Graham (2006) is an investigation into the language learning beliefs of students of French in Years 11 to 13. The two groups of learners – in total, ten students are the focus of this article – were all aged 16-18, and had a similar background in their French learning. Rather than employing purely interpretivist methods however, this study uses mixed methods, beginning with a positivist, quantitative process – a highly structured questionnaire about self-efficacy (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 317), which was returned by 287 students. This part of the research, published separately (Graham, 2004), was then looked at more closely, to provide a criterion, or purposive, sample (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 210; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 110) of 28 students for interviewing. Interviews were transcribed (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 365) and analysed – via multiple rereadings for the identification of key themes, and then further using a quantitative analysis computer software package, called QSR NUD*IST (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 256; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 488).

This analysis then allowed the researchers to cut the sample further to ten for the purpose of this article, by focusing on three particular questions relating to self-efficacy (Graham, 2006: 301).

Busse & Williams (2010) takes a methodological step further than the previous three articles, looking closely at students' levels of motivation, in relation to the L2 (second language) Motivational Self System, as expounded by Dörnyei (2005, 2009), in order to explore their reasons for studying German. By putting together a mixed methods approach, "for triangulation" (Busse & Williams, 2010: 70), it is possible to collect both quantitative and qualitative data and check them against one another – combining the strengths of both methods, and compensating for the weaknesses (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 339).

The first stage was a series of preliminary, exploratory open-ended interviews with ten students, in order to ascertain the particular areas of interest for the next phases of research – allowing respondents to share their own unique perspectives on the world (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 151). Six question areas were identified in total, from a combination of the literature and interviews, and a highly structured questionnaire was developed. Items for the questionnaire were adapted and tailored from existing research on educational motivation, or were developed exclusively for this study – meaning that the items were very tightly focussed on the task (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 299-300).

The questionnaire was distributed to the first-year cohort of two English universities – a total of 142 students – and the responses were analysed. From the respondents, three female and three male students were selected from each university to be interviewed in the final phase of the research. This purposive sample (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 210; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 110) was very tightly controlled, and based on the original questionnaire data. The final interviews were open-ended, and based upon interview questions from a previous study (Ushioda, 1996), where open questions were then followed by set prompts. The interview guide is included in an appendix, thereby ensuring transparency (Punch &

Oancea, 2014: 220) and evidence of construct validity (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 184). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed, according to Radnor's six-step analysis guide (Radnor, 2001). Content was then further analysed using MAXQDA software, to look at counting frequencies and overlaps (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 256; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 488).

Reliability and validity:

Looking at questions of reliability, Chambers' (2015) research aims follow directly on from a review of relevant literature, as stated in the article (Chambers, 2015: 1-2; Punch & Oancea, 2014: 132). Chambers is also able to open with a clear justification and explanation as to why Saxony-Anhalt in Germany is an appropriate location to study, with some arguments for generalizability and comparability with the UK system (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 151) – which offers an increased level of external validity (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 136). Indeed, the research itself follows closely the framework set out in a pilot study, which clearly states the need for an international dimension (Chambers, 2014: 246). As has already been mentioned, the fact that Chambers (2015) includes the semi-structured interview schedule in Appendix 1 (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 184), offers both transparency for reliability (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220) and evidence of construct validity.

The use of language in this article is problematic, however, in terms of reliability. Within the main body of the article, respondent comments are reported in English translation, with the original German transcribed comments reported in Appendix 3, allowing access to the actual language used by respondents – without the filter of translation (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 193). Given that translation is a subjective process in itself (Venuti, 2008), arguably it would be better for content validity for the data to have been presented the other way around – though obviously this would interfere with transparency for non-German speakers (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220).

Also problematic, and making it difficult to standardise and make comparisons, is the inconsistent group size for the interviews, with groups ranging from one to ten respondents (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 114; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 353). Similarly, with only eight different schools involved in this research: six *Gymnasien* (equivalent to UK grammar schools) and two *Sekundarschulen* (equivalent to UK secondary modern schools), and with a pronounced gender imbalance among the respondents (three of the 25 teachers interviewed were men), questions are raised about reduced construct validity and generalizability

(Punch & Oancea, 2014: 210; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 137). The self-selecting sample of volunteers – although necessitated by the restrictions placed on the project by the *Kultusministerium* (state education ministry) for Saxony-Anhalt – leads to reduced possibility of randomisation and therefore threaten external validity (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 156).

Chambers (2015) finishes by making a statement that seems to internally contradict his opening arguments for transferability between the situation in Saxony-Anhalt and the UK, explaining that attitudes to learning German in the UK are very different to attitudes to learning English in Germany:

“In Germany, English is given high status and high importance. In the UK, given the global position of English in the world, foreign languages tend generally to have lower status and lower importance. Where pupils have the option to learn languages or not, they tend not to.” (Chambers, 2015: 13)

This has a clear impact on generalizability and external validity (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 151; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 136).

Jones (2010) has a similar situation in the research. Grounded in a review of relevant literature (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 132), the research sets itself out as a small-scale “telling case” (Jones, 2010: 178; Mitchell, 1984). Taking place in the Bailiwick of Jersey, this project faces the same issues of transferability to the mainland UK system as that of Chambers (2015). Attitudes to learning French in Jersey – with its proximity to France and the history that is referred to in the introductory section (Jones, 2010: 177) – must be seen as being fundamentally different to those towards learning French in the rest of the UK, just as learning German in England is different to learning English in Germany. Unlike Chambers (2015), however, Jones (2010) does not begin with a statement explaining the transferability of the project.

Similarly, all primary schools in Jersey use the same resources; *Salut Jersey* course materials are provided centrally to all schools, using a mainly oral approach. This is a different situation compared to the mainland UK – and, for that matter, Saxony-Anhalt (Chambers, 2015: 3) – various schemes of work are available, but there is no single consistent scheme.

Whereas Chambers (2015) was restricted by the wishes of the *Kultusministerium* with regard to the number of respondents involved in the research, Jones (2010) is not so restricted. However, no explanation is given to the group size of just 12 pupils. This calls this part of the paper's reliability into question, as no mention is made of a sampling strategy (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 211). Similarly, in the write-up of the Methods (Jones, 2010: 178), it is said that teachers and students alike were to be interviewed and observed – particularly with reference to formative AfL practices. However, later on, little reference is made to the observations, with much of the findings being presented in the form of 'sound bites' from the interviews. This casts doubt upon the validity of the design of the study, as it is not possible to know which AfL practices were observed.

One of the strengths of this study is the use of group interviews – or, as it is in the text, 'pupil discussion groups' (Jones, 2010: 179). There are clear core questions or requests, and these can be adjusted according to need. This clear schedule offers evidence of transparency (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220), and of the external validity of the study (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 158), as does Jones' (2010) use of 'show and tell' to provide a concrete context to the students' work.

Graham (2006) offers a subtly mixed-method approach, starting with a quantitative questionnaire to find the purposive sample (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 110) for further investigation by qualitative means. Using mixed methods allows the researcher to play to the strengths of both kinds of approach (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 339). The validity of this study is enhanced by the substantial review of the literature, upon which the

research questions are clearly predicated (Graham, 2006: 297-298), as well as the fact that it is situated within a larger context (Graham, 2004).

The study itself is simply designed, and the rationale behind each step is clearly explained, offering excellent transparency (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220) and evidence of strong internal validity. Care has also been taken to ensure representative sampling, and to outline the criteria clearly – great for content validity, transparency and reliability (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 163).

Busse and Williams (2010) is a more complex project, in that it is looking at students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to study further (Deci & Ryan, 1985), rather than the effects of a transitional period. The theoretical framework is very thoroughly explained, as is the background against which the research is set – with much attention paid to Dörnyei's framework of the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei 2005, 2009). This is indicative of the study's reliability and content validity. The mixed method approach employed by Busse and Williams (2010) is more developed still than that employed by Graham (2006), with much consideration given to the construction of the bespoke questionnaire around six key areas: wish for language proficiency; intrinsic reasons; ideal self; instrumental reasons; integrative reasons, and ought-to self. The clarity of this process is indicative of the internal validity of this study (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007: 158). The questionnaire items are given in an appendix, for transparency (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 220), and the analysis of the questionnaire responses is also given much weight.

Findings and implications:

Each of the four studies offers findings that are of use to educationalists – particularly to teachers of MFL. Chambers (2015) finds that, just as in the UK, Saxony-Anhalt offers a mixed degree of success in managing transition from primary to secondary languages learning. From this study, it is evident that while continuing professional development (CPD) provision for teachers in Saxony-Anhalt is strong, few secondary MFL teachers actually spend time in primary schools, meaning that consistent communication is uncommon. Also, in Germany, there is no common diagnostic framework to assess pupil competences. The creation of such a framework would be of great use to teachers – a situation that would also be of benefit to teachers in the UK as we move into a new phase of ‘assessment without levels’ (DfE, 2014: 2-3).

For Jones (2010), consistency in communication and terminology is also important. There should be more consistency in terminology, to enable students to make connections themselves, specifically with regard to learning intentions and success criteria. However, it is not all negative, as confidence in students can be fostered by showing high expectations and allowing them to work independently. Indeed, students find it easier to gauge whether they have made progress – with or without an external level structure (DfE, 2014: 2-3) – if they have greater autonomy and responsibility, and feel that they face more challenge. Peer assessment is a very strong AfL practice, and secondary teachers could build further on the skills developed by pupils at primary level. Just as with Chambers (2015), it is essential for teachers to make connections; primary-secondary dialogue is already in place in many cases, but could be enhanced.

For Graham (2006), the research had a different focus, finding that learners with low self-efficacy differ from learners with high self-efficacy, in that the aforementioned tend to blame failure on factors over which they have no control. Learners with high self-efficacy are more likely to attribute failure to factors over which they have control, such as effort or strategy use. It is this dichotomy between effort and natural ability that is at the core of the research. If, as educators, we are able to get students to see that

specific strategies really do make a difference to their performance, then we will enable them to achieve more.

Finally, Busse and Williams (2010) found that students' reasons for studying German beyond school level are essentially driven by a wish for language proficiency, and a very high intrinsic motivation for studying German. So, in terms of impact for teachers, "while enjoyment of language learning is crucial for students' decision to continue with language learning, it is precisely the lack of enjoyment of language learning that seems to be one of the main reasons for students dropping out of modern foreign languages." (Busse & Williams, 2010: 81). By extension, it should not be argued that making modern languages compulsory would lead to an increase in applications for university-level languages study.

Word count: 2,999

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