

Chambers, G. (2015) ‘The Teachers’ voice in Saxony-Anhalt: perspectives on transition from primary to secondary school’, *The Language Learning Journal*

Aims and Rationale

The transition from primary to secondary school is a difficult time for students – particularly with regard to Modern Foreign Languages learning (Board & Tinsley, 2014; Burstall, *et al*, 1974).

The aim of Chambers’ (2015) study is to look at the example of the school system in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, to see how the challenges of transition have been addressed in a comparable school system.

Methodology

Chambers (2015) adopts an interpretivist approach, conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews with 25 German teachers of English, from eight different secondary schools (six *Gymnasien* and two *Realschulen*) in the Saxony-Anhalt region, centred around four main themes:

Practical preparation	Primary/secondary school collaboration
Exchange of data	Transition management and prior learning

This qualitative approach is appropriate, because it allows a degree of flexibility to adapt the questions, while retaining a clear focus (Punch & Oancea, 2014; Cohen, *et al*, 2007). There were a range of group and one-to-one interviews. After numerous re-readings, qualitative evaluation identified key themes inductively, leading to a coding framework for more detailed analysis.

Findings

Four key themes emerged from the interviews, and they related closely to the main themes identified in the previous sections:

- Opportunities to attend courses on transition and transition-specific staffing issues.
- Low levels of collaboration between primary and secondary colleagues.
- Patchy exchange of information between primary and secondary schools about pupil performance.
- Pupils’ competences and teachers’ own subject knowledge.

Key Outcomes

- Saxony-Anhalt offers a mixed degree of success in managing transition from primary to secondary languages learning.
- Continuing professional development provision for teachers in Saxony-Anhalt is strong.
- Few secondary teachers actually spent time in primary schools. Consistent communication was uncommon.
- There is no common diagnostic framework to assess pupil competences.

References

- Board, K. & Tinsley, T. (2014) *Language Trends 2013–14. The State of Language Learning in Primary and Secondary Schools in England*. London: British Council and CfBT Education Trust.
- Burstall, C., Jamieson, M., Cohen, S. & Hargreaves, M. (1974) *Primary French in the Balance*. Windsor: National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales.
- Chambers, G. (2015) ‘The Teachers’ voice in Saxony-Anhalt: perspectives on transition from primary to secondary school’, *The Language Learning Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/09571736.2015.1017519
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education*. 6th ed. Abingdon: Routledge
- Punch, K. F. & Oancea, A. (2014) *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- Venuti, L. (2008) *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Critique

The positives:

- Qualitative, open-ended interpretivist design is the best fit for this kind of data gathering (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 114).
- Semi-structured interviews allow a high degree of flexibility (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 183; Cohen, *et al*, 2007: 353).
- Research aims follow directly on from a review of *relevant literature* (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 132).
- Clear justification and explanation as to why Saxony-Anhalt was appropriate location to study, with some arguments for generalisability and comparability with the UK system (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 151).
- Original German quotations transcribed in Appendix 3, to allow access to the actual language used by respondents – without the filter of translation. (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 193) – however, see below.
- Semi-structured interview schedule included in Appendix 1 (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 184), offers both transparency and validity.

The not-so-good:

- Inconsistent group size for interviews – ranging from one to ten respondents – makes it difficult to standardise and make comparisons (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 114; Cohen, *et al*, 2007: 353).
- Generalisability – attitudes to learning German in the UK are very different to attitudes to learning English in Germany (Chambers, 2015; Punch & Oancea, 2014: 151).
- Self-selecting sample of volunteers – restrictions placed on the project by the *Kultusministerium* leads to reduced randomisation and therefore validity (Cohen, *et al*, 2007).
- Only eight different schools were involved: six *Gymnasien* and two *Sekundarschulen*, with a pronounced gender imbalance (Punch & Oancea, 2014: 210), leading to reduced validity and generalisability.
- Reports translated comments in the main body of the report – translation is a subjective process in itself (Venuti, 2008) – however, see above.