Abstracts of selected recent journal articles

Student mobility, qualifications and academic recognition in the EU

A. West and E. Barham (2009)

Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice 16(1): 25-37

This paper explores the relationship between student mobility, qualifications and academic recognition within Europe. It provides an outline of supranational legal instruments and policies in relation to academic recognition and student mobility. It then examines some of the difficulties associated with the different concepts underpinning the notion of 'student mobility' and the consequences in terms of the data available. This is followed by an overview of national policies relating to university admissions, recognition of upper secondary qualifications and mobility, with particular reference to four EU countries with different systems of higher education. We argue that although recognition is clearly of importance, other issues, in particular foreign language proficiency and adequate financial support, also need to be addressed if student mobility is to increase significantly.

Another Look at the Language Difficulties of International Students

Y. Zhang and Y. Mi (2010)

Journal of Studies in International Education 14(4): 371-388

International students encounter language-related problems in their academic studies. Specific problem areas have been identified and possible underlying causes have been explored. The present study investigates the impact of two variables—length of study and academic disciplines—in relation to the problems. The findings from a survey and interview of 40 Chinese students at 8 Australian universities reveal that though listening and speaking pose a lot of difficulties for the majority of the informants, the difficulties are confined to the first 2 years, and they do not seem to affect the academic study of those informants in linguistically less demanding courses. Reading does not seem to be a problem area but writing does, across academic disciplines, defying the 2-year mark. These findings call for a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the language difficulties experienced by international students.

Thinking aloud about L2 decoding: an exploration of the strategies used by beginner learners when pronouncing unfamiliar French words

R. Woore (2010)

Language Learning Journal 38(1): 3-17

'Decoding' – converting the written symbols (or graphemes) of an alphabetical writing system into the sounds (or phonemes) they represent, using knowledge of the language's symbol/sound correspondences – has been argued to be an important but neglected skill in the teaching of second language (L2) French in English secondary schools. Several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have highlighted poor levels of L2 decoding proficiency amongst beginner learners of French at Key Stage 3. However, there has been less investigation of these learners' strategic reasoning when attempting to decode French words. Previous exploratory research in this area found that, in the absence of adequate knowledge of French decoding conventions, participants relied on English decoding processes to deal with French words. There was also some evidence that the most successful decoders were those who were aware of this influence of English and sought to move beyond it, thinking consciously about how to pronounce words in a more 'French' way. The current small-scale, exploratory study set out to investigate in more detail the conscious strategies employed by participants as they tried to generate 'French' pronunciations of unfamiliar words. Twelve beginner learners of French of varying attainment levels were asked to read aloud unknown French words, and to describe their thought processes. Reading the words aloud proved to be an effortful, conscious process for these participants, similar to a problem-solving task and very different from their automatic L1 decoding. They used a range of conscious strategies to support their L2 decoding, and there was a high degree of consistency among the strategies employed by the various participants. However, the strategies often led to incorrect outcomes because they were not underpinned by secure knowledge of French symbol/sound correspondences.

The languages classroom: place of comfort or obstacle course?

M. Nicolson and H. Adams (2010)

Language Learning Journal 38(1): 37-49.

This article problematises certain aspects of methodology used for speaking practice and commonly applied in contemporary language teaching classrooms. It examines these particularly with relevance to diversity in adult learning groups. The aspects under scrutiny include the use of personal information in tasks, pair and group work, target language as classroom language, physical movement, communication of task expectation and rationale, and student opportunity to opt out of or adapt tasks. It discusses how student reaction to these methodological aspects can affect their integration into the interactive group situation, their engagement in and management of tasks set by the teacher, and, as a consequence, their success in the development of speaking skills. Results from a survey of beginner language learners at the Open University give an insight into student reaction to these areas of methodology and help the authors to reach conclusions about facilitative and inhibiting factors which make the classroom either a place of comfort or an obstacle course. As a result of survey data and comments, the authors exhort teachers to be sensitive and flexible when designing tasks and to be alert to how they manage them. They also need to be attentive to how students respond when carrying them out in the classroom context so that successful integration is guaranteed for as many students as possible.

Implementing a strategy awareness raising programme: strategy changes and feedback

M. Blanco, M. Pino, and B. Rodriguez (2010)

Language Learning Journal 38(1): 51-65.

This article reports on a collaborative action research study carried out on three groups of Spanish beginners during the implementation of a strategy awareness raising programme (SAR). The objective was to analyse the impact of the SAR programme on the students' learning process in three main areas: strategy awareness, strategy use in learning Spanish, and transfer of strategies from Spanish to other subjects. In addition, feedback on the programme was sought from the students. The study involved the use of mixed methods combining selfreport and observational data. The triangulated data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire, interviews and the lecturer's observation journal. Findings revealed significant changes in strategy awareness, strategy use and strategy transfer reported by students, and positive feedback on the programme given by students and lecturer. It is, therefore, argued that these findings illustrate some of the potential benefits of strategy awareness raising programmes, and further development, implementation and research into similar programmes are recommended.

Why German? Motivation of students studying German at English universities

V. Busse and M. Williams (2010)

Language Learning Journal 38(1): 67-85.

What drives students to study German at university level? Although motivational research has been booming in recent years, students' motivation to pursue a modern foreign language beyond school level has not received much attention in the UK. This article sheds light on the various reasons that drive students in the UK to pursue a modern foreign language at university level. The results presented here are part of a longitudinal study on motivational processes of first year students studying German at two major universities. A mixed methods approach was used, employing quantitative and qualitative methods. Pedagogical implications for both schools and universities are discussed.

The Challenges of Chinese: A Preliminary Study of UK Learners' Perceptions of Difficulty

B. Hu (2010)

Language Learning Journal 38(1): 99-118

This study aims to highlight aspects of difficulty encountered by Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners and to explore the factors underlying these aspects. Data were gathered through a Chinese Language Learning Difficulty Survey from 164 CFL learners, mostly in British higher education. The survey data provided useful exploratory findings. Factor analysis of 34 aspects of difficulty drew out six major factors: grammar; aural reception; words; oral production; pronunciation; and recall. Further analyses suggested that the variables of proficiency level and learning style interact strongly with some of these factors, but not with others.

'Value added' modern languages teaching in the classroom: an investigation into how teachers' use of classroom target language can aid pupils' communication skills

Crichton, H. (2009)

Language Learning Journal 37(1): 19-34.

This paper presents some of the preliminary findings of a study into modern languages (ML) learning in five Scottish secondary schools. Five ML teachers were observed and audio-recorded over a period of several weeks while teaching their third-year classes (pupils aged 14–15 years). All the teachers used the target language extensively in their classrooms. The purpose of the study was two-fold: to observe how the teachers went about their work and to examine how pupils responded to the teachers' continuous input in the foreign language, with few mother tongue interjections. A sample of pupils was also interviewed. Despite a range of schools and ability levels of classes observed, the analysis of the data uncovered important similarities in the techniques the teachers used to promote pupils' language learning, which are the focus of this article.

Why the British do not learn languages: myths and motivation in the United Kingdom

Coleman, J. A. (2009)

Language Learning Journal 37(1): 111-127.

In the light of recent debates on the declining take-up of languages in English schools, and on pupils' motivation towards language learning, this article furthers discussion and asks broader questions. Is there a coincidence between trends in British attitudes to Europe and the growing or waning enthusiasm for language learning across all sectors? What role is played - and what attitudes revealed - by the pronouncements and actions of British politicians when they are not specifically addressing language issues? Is public xenophobia echoed or shaped by the printed and broadcast media? And when so many initiatives are seeking to address British insularity and monolingualism, is there more that can be done?

Assessing intercultural capability in learning languages: Some issues and considerations

A. Scarino (2009)

Language Teaching 42(1): 67-80.

Teachers of languages, as well as educators in general and employers, increasingly recognise the importance of developing intercultural capability. This recognition, however, brings the question of how this is evidenced as an outcome of learning. The assessment of this capability poses a range of theoretical and practical challenges. I begin with a description of languages learning within an intercultural orientation and a model for understanding assessment. I then discuss issues of conceptualising and defining the construct, as integral to the process of assessment. Next, I consider issues in eliciting intercultural capability in a proposed framework that includes assessment as both communicative performance (elicited in 'critical moments') and meta-awareness (elicited in commentaries). To conclude,

I discuss issues related to identifying and judging evidence of the development of the intercultural capability and warranting the inferences made about students' developing understanding. The discussion is based on the experience of ongoing studies investigating the assessment of the intercultural capability in learning languages and in international education.eneral and employers, increasingly recognise the importance of developing intercultural capability. This recognition, however, brings the question of how this is evidenced as an outcome of learning. The assessment of this capability poses a range of theoretical and practical challenges. I begin with a description of languages learning within an intercultural orientation and a model for understanding assessment. I then discuss issues of conceptualising and defining the construct, as integral to the process of assessment. Next, I consider issues in eliciting intercultural capability in a proposed framework that includes assessment as both communicative performance (elicited in 'critical moments') and meta-awareness (elicited in commentaries). To conclude, I discuss issues related to identifying and judging evidence of the development of the intercultural capability and warranting the inferences made about students' developing understanding. The discussion is based on the experience of ongoing studies investigating the assessment of the intercultural capability in learning languages and in international education.

Language Matters – A Position Paper by the British Academy (2009)

Source: http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/language-matters/position-paper.cfm

Introduction

1. The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, and takes a keen interest in the health of these disciplines and their ability to contribute to the well-being of the country. The Academy has for some time been concerned about the state of foreign language learning in the UK at all levels, and has drawn attention to these concerns in various ways, including submissions to Government.

2. The Academy commissioned a report from a team of external researchers at RAND Europe in response to concerns that UK-born and -educated researchers lack essential foreign language skills, which limits their ability to engage with research topics requiring advanced knowledge of languages other than English. The Academy is concerned that this may damage the internationally recognised distinction of UK scholarship within the humanities and social sciences and the ability of UK-born researchers to contribute to international projects. Poor language competencies also limit the career opportunities available to researchers. Large sums are at present available on a competitive basis from EU sources for university research groups based in three or more countries. It may become increasingly difficult for UK universities to put forward convincing applications for these funds if language skills are not also demonstrably available. The lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels will affect the UK's ability to compete effectively in a global market and to promote UK interests in a global context. It will also make UK citizens less likely to be in the running for a range of work opportunities available both at home and overseas.

3. This report is part of a wider concern about the language skills deficit in the UK, and its potentially harmful impact on the UK's social, cultural and economic well-being. While it is often difficult to obtain statistical evidence to demonstrate the scale of the problem, the downward trend in language take-up both at school and at university is worrying. Moreover, the UK's performance is poor in comparison with the majority of its EU competitors, most of whom have increased the extent to which their school pupils and university students are required to learn foreign languages.

To read the full statement please click on the link here.