

TRANSITION FROM SENIOR SECONDARY TO TERTIARY LANGUAGES STUDY: STUDENT ATTITUDES IN THREE SYDNEY SCHOOLS

Abstract

This paper reports on a small study of attitudes to tertiary language study, amongst senior secondary language learners in three independent New South Wales schools. The study examines what elements of preparedness may be the most effective in supporting transition to tertiary study for this sample of languages students. From analysis of survey data, motivation, confidence in language achievement, and the construction of a ‘future self’ as a language user and learner appear to be useful elements positively supporting transition to tertiary study. Findings from this study point to a relationship between the construction of ‘future selves’ as language users, and their academic performance, motivation, self-esteem and aspirations.

Introduction

Recent studies and reports have expressed concern about the dropping participation rates for languages education, both at secondary and at tertiary level (Absalom, 2011; Group of Eight, 2007; Hajdu, 2005; Liddicoat, Scarino, Jowan Curnow, Kohler, Scrimgeour & Morgan, 2007; Lo Bianco & Gvozdenko, 2006; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009; Ren, 2009; West-Sooby & Bouvet, 2004; Winter, 2009). Within this context, issues in the transition between secondary and tertiary languages education have been of more limited research interest (Absalom, 2011).

In this paper we report a small sub-set of data from a study (with Stott and Fielding, through a research grant from the *Languages and Cultures Network of Australian Universities* in 2012, see www.lcnau.org) that aimed to provide indicative data about structural and attitudinal aspects of the transition of language learners from the final year of secondary school to first-year university.

This study focuses on a small set of survey data from senior secondary language learners from three independent schools in New South Wales. It is informed by the findings of the Fielding and Stott (2012) study where the focus was on first-year University language students. While it is a

New South Wales context small scale study, we believe there are aspects which may be of interest to the national context.

Literature Review

This review firstly examines literature which informs our understanding of issues in continuity in secondary and tertiary language study. The study's larger context is adolescent development of identity, and thus, the review secondly briefly considers literature which has suggested the role of language learning in the development in a future L2 self.

Sustained achievement in language learning is best supported by a continuous trajectory of study and exposure, optimally beginning in primary school, but more commonly, from lower through to upper secondary school and beyond (Savignon, 2006; Spolsky & Lambert, 2006). In 2012 in New South Wales, nine per cent of final year matriculation students (in New South Wales, the Higher School Certificate) were examined in a non-English language subject (New South Wales Board of Studies, 2013). From this matriculation candidature, some may then proceed to either higher-level study of a school-learned language, or commence study of a new language at university. While attention has been directed to continuity within the secondary school years (e.g. Hajdu, 2005; Jowan Curnow & Kohler, 2007; Liddicoat et al., 2007; Reitzenstein, 2013; Ren, 2009), continuity between upper-secondary and lower-tertiary sectors has been less frequently examined (Absalom, 2011).

Despite political rhetoric in support of national need for linguistically able young Australians (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2012), many factors, social and economic, contribute to student numbers shrinking in elective study of languages in Secondary Years 8 to 10 (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). This may result in small numbers electing to continue, or pick up new languages, in Years 11 and 12. The NSW senior language syllabuses are designed to be stimulating, with objectives such as the exchange of opinions, expression of original ideas (New South Wales Board of Studies, 2009a) and to be used as an 'adjunct to their career path' (New South Wales Board of Studies, 2009b, p.6), relevant to students' lives and future career aspirations.

Tertiary language teaching has been marked by innovation and change (Jarkey, 2004; Lo Bianco & Gvozdenko, 2006; Travis, Hajek, Nettelbeck, Beckmann & Lloyd-Smith, 2014) and caters for both secondary continuers and beginner students. While tertiary beginner language courses offer

opportunity to learn a new language, it is also essential for universities to nurture those students with six or more years of prior school language learning, and to build on that foundation. The universities acknowledge the role of language study in producing more interculturally competent graduates with global employment capabilities (for example <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/slc/>). Areas of inconsistency have been identified (Lo Bianco & Gvozdenko, 2006) both between, and within educational systems, impeding sustained successful learning. It has been identified that lack of consistency in establishing course entry eligibility criteria, language unit offerings, continuity and communication between school and university systems have all led to a situation where student language learning may be disrupted at key points in the progress through secondary and into tertiary environment (BOS NSW 2013; Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002).

Relationships between secondary and tertiary sectors need to be understood and supported in order for language teachers in both contexts to maximise the benefits of coherent and continuous language study from secondary through to tertiary levels. It has been suggested that school authorities need to consider their responsibility in relation to program conditions (such as time allocated, and continuity) to ensure quality and sustained provision, concluding that “language learning requires significant time, regularity and continuity” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011, p.8). Similarly Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko (2006, p.11) maintain that “institutions interested in supporting innovation in pedagogy and delivery of language programs, must ensure that they build into their operating arrangements mechanisms for sustaining the innovation or collaboration over time”. Fielding and Stott (2012) have drawn attention to the lack of research on the crucial transitional stage from secondary school to university, placing their focus on the experience of first year tertiary language learners. The current study hopes to shed light on attitudes to continued tertiary language study, in a small sample of final year language students from three Sydney schools.

Studies of the issues in secondary–tertiary transition, or more accurately, the First Year Experience (see for example, Kift, 2005, 2008; King & Thalluri, 2006) have identified difficulties for the first year student (West-Sooby & Bouvet, 2004). These difficulties have included a learning ‘gap’ between secondary and tertiary pedagogies and expectations, and lack of preparation at the secondary level. There has been a perception of the need for intervention at the secondary level. Brady and Allingham (2007), for example, have complained about the poor preparation and information about university life that is provided at the secondary level. There is

a tendency from the tertiary perspective to critique secondary pedagogy as breeding too much dependence, “spoon feeding” style, and lacking autonomy. Fielding and Stott (2012, p. 2) note that first year students need autonomy, to cope with a faster pace of learning, and mix with a broad range of students (p. 8). Fielding and Stott (2012) conclude that many first year language students struggle with the ‘culture of learning a language at university level’ (p. 9).

As this study sits within the context of the adolescent learner in senior secondary years, the analysis has also been informed by literature which has underlined the significance of study choices in identity development in older adolescents.

Kalakoski and Nurmi (1998) have suggested that, in secondary students’ choice of subjects in the senior years, they express a personal alignment and investment with subjects that are important in their thinking, and to their future choices, meaningful pathways to jobs and tertiary studies. Adolescents’ identity exploration, commitment, and ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are affected by how these choices are shaped.

Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou’s study (1998) established a relationship between “possible selves”, academic performance, motivation, self-esteem and persistence on task. They suggested that students who construct and envision themselves at a desired goal, produce learning that favours that goal and students are able to construct more efficient plans to achieve it. Strong academic performance and more persistence on-task occurs for students who are able to produce well-elaborated, vivid pictures of future selves. Similarly, Stake & Nickens (2005) have also underlined that students may envision a future self, arising from a particular subject area, serving as a personalised representation of one’s goals, and providing a context which makes meaning of study. In particular for these language students, it is the ‘Second Language future self’ (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009; Dornyei, 2009), which is motivating them to pursue and attach value to further language study. Their emerging identity as a language user is constructed around the ability to communicate, to express oneself, and to participate in a language community. In this study we understand identity as socially constructed, that is, constructed through interaction and negotiation with, in this case, teachers, school peers, parents, peers in the target language country, and many others (Cummins 1996, 2000, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McNamara 1987, 1997; Norton, 2000). It will be fluid, complex and contradictory, constructing and being constructed by language (Norton, 2006). One’s language repertoire, including additional languages, is a key element in the process

as it assists individuals to balance the various roles and aspects of their identities (Fought, 2006). Adolescent bilingual individuals may position themselves between two languages and two (or more) cultures (Kanno, 2003) as they create a new hybrid identity for themselves.

We acknowledge that scholars have struggled with the limitations of the term ‘identity’ and have preferred to move to a focus on the process of identification (Block, 2006; Omoniyi, 2006). Similarly, Lo-Philip (2010) uses the term ‘identity processes’, in an effort to reflect the “multiple dynamic relationships between language and social/individual identity” (Lo-Philip, 2010, p. 282). Teaching and learning need to be aware of the significance of group membership and “belonging” (Weeks, 1990, p. 88) as important factors that contribute to better learning of language, in the shaping of student identities (Kanno, 2003).

Very limited research attention has been paid to the aspirations, expectations and needs of senior language students making the transition to tertiary language study. The goal of this small study is to open a timely enquiry into the attitudes of learners at this transition point.

Methodology

The methodology of the larger project, from which the data of this paper have been taken, involved the administering of an online survey to Year 12 and 1st Year University students at two Sydney universities and three Sydney secondary schools. The survey was designed to investigate students’ attitudes to, and perceptions of possible issues in languages transition.

Fielding and Stott (2012) in their study of first year University language students, found that students reporting a smooth transition into first year language study identified three common factors. These were previous study of the language, what they perceived to be good teaching in Year 12, and possession of independent learning strategies. Thus this study was designed to examine the presence of these characteristics in participants.

The survey consisted of 25 items, including information about language(s) studied, length of study, opinion statements using Likert scale, and open-ended items for additional optional comment.

This paper analyses the data from surveys completed by 57 students in Year 12 languages classes at three independent schools in Sydney. In the approved Human Research Ethics Committee protocol approved, the senior language teacher in each school mediated the invitation from the

researchers and provided class time in which the students had the opportunity to voluntarily and anonymously participate in the survey. Participants do not represent the total cohort of the classes.

The survey was conducted as the students were preparing to leave school and undertake their NSW Higher School Certificate examinations.

Findings

We report the findings in two sub-sections. Firstly, we examine the demographic information about the participants and their study. Secondly we report their attitudes to tertiary languages study.

(1) Respondents and demographic data

Fifty seven respondents indicated the Year 12 language course(s) in which they were enrolled, as presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Nineteen of the students were studying two languages. 43 respondents were female, 14 male, representing existing gender imbalance in language study (Carr, 2002). All but four respondents reported that English was their first language. Fifty-four of the 57 respondents were domestic students, and three were international students. Fifty-one of the 57 respondents indicated they lived at home, with six students indicating they were boarding or living away from home. While it may not be individually true for every student, the overall cohorts of their independent schools may be considered as coming from a high socioeconomic background.

The students indicated how many years they had been studying their first additional language and their second additional language. Fifty percent (50%) had studied their first additional language for 3-6 years, with 16% having studied more than seven years. In the case of a second additional language, over ninety percent (90%) had studied between 2-6 years.

Of the 57 students, 34 reported having been to a country where the additional language is used, within the last three years. Of the 19 students taking a second additional language, six reported that they had been to a country where the language was used, in the last 3 years. In the open-ended response section of the questionnaire, it is clear that the majority of those travel experiences were due to school exchange programs.

The participants' languages classes were mostly between 6 – 10 students in size, as shown in Table 2, with the exception of the large Italian Beginners class (16 – 20 students).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In sum, most respondents were studying in small enrolment classes, in schools able to support small class size in order to offer sustained study pathways. While this small study was located in independent school contexts, thus not representative of all senior language students, these students nevertheless represent a significant sector of senior language learners, as represented in language participation statistics (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). These students are part of the cohort with whom university language departments might wish to engage, and recruit, for continued tertiary language study.

Having established the profile of this group, we turn to examine student attitudes towards transition to university language study.

(2) Attitudes to tertiary language study

Participant attitudes towards transition to university language study were mixed. Of the 57 respondents, 29 (approximately 50%) reported that they would continue with their first additional language at university, while 6 students agreed they would continue with a 'second' school learnt additional language at university. Sixteen of the respondents (28%) also indicated that they were intending to take up a new language at university.

Students not continuing language study at university offered additional comments noting their regret that limited choice in their desired degrees precluded language study. Students were also asked about travel plans associated with their tertiary language learning, as a possible indicator of motivation and further investment. Almost half of the respondents had plans to travel to a country of the language they intended to study at university.

Participants were however tentative about their knowledge of university language programs. Only 23% of respondents 'knew what to expect'. For one third, their teachers had played some role in preparing them for what to expect of a language course at university. Where respondents felt their teachers had not prepared them for university, they understood that teacher attention was focused on their immediate examination needs. Students appear to be able to access more general information about university from other sources, as almost half of them agreed they had been informed by family, friends, university open days, internet sources, as to tertiary options and learning environment.

Respondents were asked what had influenced them in their decision to study their language(s) in the senior secondary years, at the end of Year 10 (the fourth year of secondary school) and they were able to choose more than one option: nearly 58% chose the option "a family member or close friend", 21% indicated "a positive exchange opportunity", and 37% indicated "a positive school language experience". Their additional comments to this item suggest that even at this point in Year 10, their future aspirations and identity as language users were in formation: "a desire to be able to speak a second language and the potential opportunities this could offer me, not just in the work place"; "wanting to speak a language other than English – to be more worldly/cultural".

We were also interested in the pedagogic environment in which these students were studying. It has been noted that one practice which supports quality language learning environment is sustained communicative social interaction in the target language by the teacher and students (Savignon, 2006). While we acknowledge that teaching in the target language per se, does not automatically lead to efficient learning (Pachler, Barnes and Field, 2009), maximum exposure to, and purposeful use of, the target language, in the context of senior secondary teaching, is beneficial to students' linguistic confidence and competence (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). It is also effective preparation for speaking and listening skill assessments which are part of the high

stakes assessment regime. The survey asked students to give information about the degree to which their teacher(s) used the target language in class. Two thirds of students indicated that the teacher spoke more than 70% of the time in the target language. Nearly half of students indicated that they respond to the teacher in the target language more than 70% of the time in class.

Students were also asked for their perception of their own language skills in reading writing, speaking, listening. Acknowledging that there are other competencies involved in language learning, this item was designed as an informal self-reported indicator of their linguistic confidence. Our assumption was that they would interpret the word “strong”, in assessing themselves, only in relation to their knowledge of highest Year 12 standards in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate performance, as seen, for example, in exam performance descriptors and available relevant resources. Students chose from a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 indicates students’ reported confidence in their language abilities. The fifth item in Table 3 displays particular confidence both in student personal capacity to perform in their language, and, without accurate forward knowledge, to meet imagined tertiary demands.

Three quarters of participants reported that in their perception the learning environment in their language class was stimulating. Furthermore, 40 of 57 students agreed that they have been encouraged to work independently within their language learning. This accords well with the independence and autonomy which are expected and required in first year tertiary language study (Fielding & Stott, 2012).

Discussion

As noted, studies of the issues in secondary–tertiary transition, or more commonly, the First Year Experience, have identified a learning ‘gap’ between secondary and tertiary learning, and lack of preparation at the secondary level (West-Sooby & Bouvet, 2004) . Fielding and Stott (2012, p. 2) note that first year students need autonomy to cope with a faster pace of learning, and conclude

that many first year language students struggle with the ‘culture of learning a language at university level’ (p. 9).

However, this study, while limited, offers a contradiction to these observations. It indicates that this particular sample of senior secondary language students, within their current frame of reference, feels prepared for tertiary language study.

There are three aspects of their preparedness. Firstly, while they are unclear about specifics, they have received information about university in general, from teachers, family and friends.

Secondly, in their perception, they have been members of stimulating classrooms in which they have engaged with a degree of independent learning, in courses where critical thinking and independent construction of opinion are required (Cooper, 2010; New South Wales Board of Studies, 2009b). We acknowledge that the demands of tertiary language courses will certainly be different from secondary languages syllabuses, and these students may well encounter more difference than they anticipate, in their first year of university language learning.

Thirdly, many appear to have engaged already with personal alignment and investment in possible future choices and identities (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998), constructing a “future self” in pathways to jobs and tertiary studies. The study may support the findings of Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou (1998), by suggesting in these students a relationship between self-reported strong academic achievement in their language study, motivation, and “possible selves” as future language users. In terms of motivation, their knowledge of tertiary study and career pathways may be playing a role in the construction of aspiration and investment. One student reflected this in the comment: “I recognise that many doors will be open to me if I continue studying this language to be fluent”.

The nurturing of a ‘Second Language future self’ (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009; Dornyei, 2009), has motivated them to study in senior secondary years and the stimulation of that study appears to support the pursuit of further goals. From the limited data, it may be suggested that they have constructed an identity around the ability to communicate, to express oneself, and to participate as a language user in a language community. The strength of this second language future self, or adult language user identity, and its goals, may be a small part of the instrumental motivation which Macaro and Wingate (2004) found to support success in first year tertiary study.

This small study suggests that the development of an identity as confident language user may support student intention to study languages at university. We suggest that secondary teachers consider this development in the earlier years of language learning. We are mindful that attitude formation is multifaceted, influenced by a variety of personal and environmental factors over a period of time (Bohner & Wanke, 2002). We suggest however that the explicit building of positive ‘self’ through the regular recognition of small achievements and mastery at lower levels of language education, may nurture this identity development earlier, supporting greater retention into senior secondary years, and thus ultimately into tertiary study. In particular we noted that for many of these students, the decision-making process at the end of Year 10, selecting senior subjects, is a critical point. The subject selection involves looking ahead to longer term language goals, and the young adult identity, or future self which the student is envisioning for him/herself. This suggests that at this point in Year 10, advocacy for language study needs to include some aspirational goal setting, contact with influential role models, and the cultivation of student’s future language-user identity.

We would also like to note, that, even amongst those students not planning to continue into tertiary programs, there were many comments indicating the positive personal impact of their language learning on their life, and their comments showed a desire to continue involvement with the language and culture, just ‘for fun’ or in social use.

If “motivation is one of the main determinants of second/ foreign language learning achievement” (Dornyei, 1994, p. 273), and motivation is identity-based (Oyserman, 2007, p. 432) then it may be suggested that even if these students encounter difficulties when they get to university, they possess some important transition strategies, of motivation, and an established identity as a language learner and user. Possibilities for the self will continue to be shaped by successes and failures, and the interpretation of those successes and failures (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Teachers’ explicit positive encouragement of risk-taking and perseverance, and cultivation of longer-term goals, are all important aspects of the construction of this ‘self’.

As noted, the three common factors identified for good transition into tertiary language learning are previous study of the language, good teaching in Year 12, and possession of independent learning strategies (Fielding & Stott, 2012). First year students in the Stott and Fielding study who reported an unsatisfactory transition into first year language studies ascribed this, in addition

to the lack of the three factors above, to diversity of language level competence in classes, teacher expectations of autonomous study, difference in pedagogies between school and university, impersonal nature of the tertiary environment, and lack of preparation for university whilst at school. While they still may encounter some of these additional obstacles, the particular sample of students of this study possess the three factors identified by Fielding and Stott (2012) common to smooth transition. We thus posit that they have a degree of preparedness for their initial interaction with tertiary language study.

We support Fielding and Stott's (2012) call for the search for a mechanism which might enable a collaborative consultation between the secondary and tertiary language teaching sectors, to establish better bridges of experience, expectations and sustained motivation. We acknowledge the unchartered and problematic nature of creating pathways between particular schools and universities. Students follow many diverse pathways of transition, nationally and internationally. The degree of communication possible between schools and universities may depend on the types of languages, geographical location, an individual school's previous contacts with university departments, and the constitution and attitudes of university language departments. To open a dialogue between secondary and tertiary language teachers would be complex, and necessarily a national initiative, between professional organizations such as LCNAU and AFMLTA. Tertiary teacher time invested in contact with secondary teacher colleagues needs to be recognised and valued as service to the community by tertiary professional development systems.

Limitations

This study reports a sub-set of findings from a larger study as noted above. This study's limited sample of students, from a limited sample of schools, makes generalization of findings problematic. However we believe that there are some indications in the data, that senior secondary language learning may support their future aspirations and development. We acknowledge unforeseen assumptions, and omissions in the survey design. We believe that the study may nevertheless serve as a useful pilot for a larger national study which could more closely take into account state differences and be designed to probe more deeply into the construction of language user identity in secondary students and its role in shaping goals and aspirations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to capture attitudes in final year secondary students to continuing their languages study at tertiary level. The study has examined elements of preparedness which may be effective in transition to tertiary study for students. The independence of thought, critical thinking, and language expectations of the senior secondary courses are strong qualities which may transfer well into tertiary language study. The creation of motivation, and the construction of a 'future L2 self' as a language learner and user, may well also be an important personal factor in preparedness. These need to be supported, however, by provision of access to information about tertiary language study choices, encouragement in the design of an individual study plan upon graduation, and open communication lines between all stakeholders. We suggest, like Oyserman and Saltz (1993) that students pursuing particular goals need to engage with language user role models, influential people whose identity has the power to bolster or impede the strength and direction of student goals.

The study suggests that those involved in languages education might be strategic in supporting informed choices for students' sustained, life-long language learning. Future studies could usefully examine how teachers communicate with their students in Year 10 about aspirations and goals of senior study and thence tertiary level study, students' knowledge about local and interstate tertiary language program availability, and how to create better communication between students, parents, and education sectors.

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Table 1: Respondents representing the various languages courses at the 3 schools

(total of responses from 57 survey responses, some students studying 2 languages)

Languages	French	French	German	German	Indon'n	Indon'n	Italian	Italian	Ital Ext.	Japan	Latin	Latin	Span.	Span.
Number of responses	13	1	8	2	7	3	20	10	1	1	2	2	1	2

Table 2: Reported class sizes of respondents' Year 12 language classes







		Response Percent	Response Total
5 or fewer students		5.26%	3
6-10 students		47.37%	27
11-15 students		8.77%	5
16-20 students		33.33%	19
21-25 students		7.02%	4
26 or more students		1.75%	1

Table 3: Respondents' self-perception of their own linguistic competence in the additional language(s) they were currently studying in Year 12

	Agree / strongly agree (total N = 57)	%
I have strong Reading skills	43	75.4%
I have strong Listening skills	29	50.9%
I have strong Speaking skills	38	66.7%
I have strong Writing skills	38	66.7%
I am confident that I will be adequately prepared in all four skill areas to continue my study at university	36	65.5%