

# SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH SIX TEACHERS AT TWO SWEDISH UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A SMALL- SCALE STUDY

## ENTREVISTAS SEMI-ESTRUCTURADAS CON SEIS PROFESORES DE DOS INSTITUTOS SUECOS: UN ESTUDIO A PEQUEÑA ESCALA

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### 1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this work come from sociocultural theory, where learning is perceived to occur as a result of dialogic activity (Bakhtin) and knowledge-building is found to be a collaborative process, encompassing negotiation of meaning (Vygotsky). In Merriam's (2002: 3) words, "meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world".

The present study takes on a constructivist view of the world, where "reality is being defined as "person-, context- and time-bound" (Croker, 2009: 6). More specifically, the researcher's interest lies in that area of applied linguistics that is investigating contexts and experiences of language use (Croker, 2009: 4).

Throughout the research process a particular focus on teacher cognition has emerged, seeking to understand teaching from within rather than from an external perspective; that is, to seek the viewpoint of the participants themselves.

Qualitative research methodology, which finds its origin in the academic disciplines anthropology, sociology, and applied linguistics, has been chosen, since the main focus of the study is on “collecting primarily textual data and examining it using interpretive analysis” (Croker, 2009: 5).

As current research in Sweden takes interest in and shows multiple views on the effects of English as language of instruction on students’ linguistic development and successful learning by using case studies (Airey, 2011; Airey & Linder, 2007), ethnography (Söderlundh, 2010), text analysis (Edlund, 2011) and classroom observation (Lim Falk, 2008), the present study finds it interesting to add to this field by means of semi-structured interviews with teachers.

## **2. Objectives**

More specifically, the aim of the present study is to describe the professional identities of six upper secondary school teachers, the views they hold of the subjects they teach, their perspectives on how to teach these subjects, and the role language is assigned for learning by means of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973 in Cowie, 2009: 171).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Framework**

A characteristic of qualitative research is that it is data-driven rather than hypothesis-driven. In contrast to quantitative research, which is typically linear, qualitative research is more simultaneous, nonlinear and iterative. Collecting, analyzing and interpreting data are done largely at the same time, in a recursive process, with researchers constantly moving back and forth between all three until new information does not add to their understanding of a topic, a point called ‘data saturation’ (Croker, 2009: 10).

### **3.2. Participants**

All of these six teachers are teaching in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classrooms, where the major part of the content is taught through an additional language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010: 3) or a language other than the learners' first language. The six teachers are working at two different upper secondary schools with about 2,000 students, located in two medium-size towns in Sweden.

The three teachers interviewed at school no.1 are subject teachers of Physics and Mathematics (T1), English and Swedish (T2) and Biology and Chemistry (T3), respectively, and they are experienced teachers, having spent more than 25 years in the profession. At the time of drafting, a description of the teacher participants at school no. 2 was unavailable as data collection was incomplete.

### **3.3.Data collection**

The major research tool has been interviews. It has been my aim to “look at what can't be observed – people's thoughts, expressions and opinions” (Burns, 2010: 74). The semi-structured interview was chosen, since it is open and flexible in its character, allowing for a conversational feel to the interview and a sense of exploring the key topics more in depth (ibid).

The semi-structured interviews have been conducted with one teacher at a time, using audio recording. The length of the interviews has been 30 minutes. The topic areas have been presented on a sheet of paper visible to both interlocutor and interviewer. As qualitative research requires, the interviews were not conducted ad hoc, but after contact had been established and a relationship had been created between the researcher and the teacher.

### **3.4.Analytical procedures**

“Qualitative data are those that are analysed without using numbers” (Burns, 2010: 106). By means of iterative interpretation and continuous refinement of categories, the researcher's endeavour throughout the study has been to “discover patterns of behavior and thinking” (Croker, 2009: 8).

Methods of analytical triangulation, such as letting the participants re-listen to parts of the interviews for verification, passing on the data analysis to a colleague for peer-review, keeping field notes for classroom observations and, to some extent,

carrying out focus group interviews with students for comparative purposes, have been used. These efforts contribute to making the present study reliable, an aspect that cannot be disregarded in any piece of research.

#### **4. Results**

Surprisingly, at school no. 1, none of the three teachers initially intended to become a teacher. Today, however, their job is being referred to as “enjoyable” and “increasingly important” (T1). In describing the status of their subject, they mention that “Mathematics has a worth of its own: it sharpens logical thinking” (T1); “there is nobody who questions why one has to study English... If I ask my students, they place English before Swedish” (T2) and “it is good citizenship education; it gives students a good understanding of important issues in society: environment, energy” (T3).

Interestingly, over time the teachers have developed different strategies for teaching and learning in English: “I always lecture in English” (T1-T3). “Whether the students themselves are able to make long explanations in English or not is not interesting to me, I want them to learn Physics” (T1). “When they are working in small groups ... if they address me in English, I answer in English, this is my strategy” (T3). “All the new teachers who join the CLIL program bring in their own perspective and develop their own strategies for teaching English through the medium of English in these classes” (T2), says one of the founders of the CLIL program at this school.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The most striking thing so far is that language is not found to be an obstacle.

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