

Bc. Iva Hubáčková, "Teaching English to Learners with Special Educational Needs at Higher Elementary School "

Diplomová práce

Posudek vedoucího práce

Teaching learners with special educational needs presents considerable obstacles to language teachers. While there is a wealth of literature and opportunities to attend specialist courses, these do not necessarily cover all age groups and all subjects. The author of the present thesis has observed a gap in the selection of training opportunities specifically for language teachers in the higher elementary school sector, and was curious to explore what these teachers' background was in terms of their beliefs, experiences and training they had received, and whether any of their knowledge is reflected in their practical teaching. She specifically focuses on special learning difficulties and ADHD.

When the thesis was originally designed it was agreed that to explore this topic a mixed-methods research design would be adopted wherein case studies would be compiled based on interviews with teachers and the results of follow-up observations of their own teaching performance in several lessons. This would have facilitated an in-depth, triangulated exploration of the extent to which teachers' beliefs were reflected in their own practice. However, following the closure of schools during the spring 2020 covid-19 pandemic, the carrying out of classroom observations became impossible and the design of the thesis had to be changed so that triangulation data could be obtained that would successfully complement interviews which had already been carried out. A survey design was adopted as the most suitable and the only possible alternative and the author showed a high degree of resilience, determination and diligence all of which she needed to redesign her thesis, learn new methodological approaches and carry out data collection and analysis in a tight time schedule.

The result is a complex thesis of high information value in terms of reviewed literature, range of concepts and depth of analysis.

The theoretical part is very thorough covering a large range of topics, which are logically ordered and whose inclusion is very well explained and clearly justifiable. At first glance it might appear that the range of topics is too large but it becomes apparent that in a qualitative exploration of teachers' beliefs and experiences it is not possible to rule out almost any related topics. Thus the author, proceeding logically from a chapter on definitions and underlying causes of SENs, progresses to the questions of teachers' beliefs regarding inclusive education, teaching strategies and specific teaching methods for SEN students, and eventually turns her attention to the various aspects of teaching foreign languages to SEN students. The remaining three chapters of the theoretical part provide an insight into the local situation in the Czech Republic focusing on individual learning plans, available specialist courses and materials for teacher development.

The thesis thus provides a thorough, readable and highly informative overview of a complex network of topics related not only to general teaching of English to SEN students but also to the status quo in the field in the Czech Republic.

Equally thorough and well explained is the description of the adopted research procedures, which the author studied from specialist literature. This enabled her to focus on many points of

fine detail in the preparation of both the interviews and the questionnaire. These are clearly explained and well thought out, including many advanced interviewing and surveying techniques. The author continually shows a strong commitment to clarity, replicability, and transparency. Her dedication to scientific rigour becomes further apparent when it is revealed that she has learnt to use two sophisticated and robust software packages for qualitative analysis (NVivo) and statistical analysis (SPSS, Stata) and a number of statistical tests and procedures. All issues dealing with the collection, processing, description, analysis and interpretation of the data are exhaustively and yet very effectively described.

The results of the interviews with the four teachers are presented as a summary of emergent themes which was facilitated by the use of NVivo. The answers reveal many interesting trends and observations which are compared within each thematic group. The results are presented clearly and general tendencies are sought and explained. The transcriptions of the interviews are provided as an appendix.

One of the thesis' many strong points is the design of the questionnaire and its analysis. The questionnaire, which has 40 main questions, was answered by 37 respondents. The author explored various relations within the multi-layered data using statistical tests. The results are presented extremely clearly, using both effective verbal description and a rich array of different types of charts.

The most challenging aspect of any mixed-method design study is the triangulation of the data. Here the results of the interviews are pitched against the questionnaire data. This was not to be an easy task as there were four interviews based on self-reported beliefs (for reasons mentioned above not backed up by classroom observations) and a questionnaire survey which was added to the design of the study at a later stage. Here the relation between the two parts is weaker, which makes the attempt at triangulation particularly tricky. But the author manages to adopt a holistic, highly synthesizing approach and makes several interesting observations which on the one hand show some inconsistencies in the teachers' answers, and on the other provide some important indication as to the possible effect of training courses on the level of competence and confidence of the teachers and reveal some areas of incomplete knowledge on the part of the teachers (especially in the area of the effect of working memory and phonological short-term memory on some skills). In the last part of the thesis, the author compares her own findings with those reported in literature and finds some interesting differences which prove how complex and contextually-bound this field is, and also how different methodological approaches might provide considerably varied results.

In reading this thesis and while writing the review, I found it very hard not to keep repeating the word clear but it is an adjective which most appropriately describes the thesis. Its clarity stems from logical formulations and logical sequencing of thoughts and concepts, excellent use of visual evidence, very disciplined argumentation, thorough description of and adherence to disciplined and well-researched methodology, and no omissions which would raise unanswerable questions. The overall impression of clarity is further increased by the inclusion in the appendix of full transcriptions, full reports on the statistical analyses and coding and a complete summary of the survey answers. Everything about this thesis, despite its complexity and the breadth of research, is thus not only highly clear but also utterly honest and transparent.

The author of the thesis worked highly independently. She proved herself to be a highly competent academic capable of fast yet deep acquisition of new skills, capable of working to strict deadlines (a significant part of the thesis had to be redesigned at a last minute following the coronavirus pandemic) and with exemplary feel for research ethics. The resulting thesis uncovers several important facts which should be introduced to the professional and teaching audience by means of journal articles.

The thesis contains a minimum of typing errors. I have also noticed one omission in the bibliography Lavrakis (2008), which is however properly cited in the text. If time had allowed, as the thesis' supervisor I would have recommended a slight reduction of the topics covered in the theoretical part to match more neatly the emergent themes in the interviews and questionnaires. But this does not detract from the quality of the thesis.

It might appear that this thesis could easily have contained only one of the research parts but it is to be borne in mind that the original design of the thesis, as has been mentioned above, had to be changed owing to the closure of schools in spring 2020. This brought about several serious constraints. The already prepared, recorded and transcribed interviews would in effect be wasted and presented on their own without the observation data, as had been planned, would have resulted in too subjective and incomplete an account of the reality. Presenting both the case studies and the questionnaire data despite their somewhat slightly looser connection does provide a deeper insight into the explored phenomenon. We could also speculate that if more time had been available and if teachers had not been tied down so extensively by online teaching there would have been more respondents. But receiving 37 respondents under the circumstances is a success in its own right. The story of the origins of scientific studies ought not to matter as each work has its own story. But in the exceptional situation of spring 2020 the author deserves considerable praise for managing to produce a thesis of this quality in face of all of the obstacles.

Conclusion

This thesis in several areas exceeds the common standards for MA theses and I classify it as **excellent (výborná)**.

PhDr. Tomáš Gráf, Ph.D.

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Questions

1. How do you explain the negative attitude of some of the teachers you interviewed to inclusion? Was inclusion sufficiently defined to them so that they knew what type of inclusion was meant?
2. Which of the results you have acquired do you find most surprising? What explanation do you have?