**Links between English and Foreign Languages**

This material is linked to the issue of undertaking experiments discussed in Chapter 1 of the book by Opie and Brown (2019).

Look at the following information, adapted from Moore, (1997: 94), regarding the collection of some quantitative data to ascertain if studying a foreign language increases students’ verbal ability in English. Before moving to the next page, decide for yourself what you think the answer might be, discussing it with others if you have the opportunity.

A researcher obtains lists of all seniors in their high school that did and did not study a foreign language. They then compare their scores on a standard test of English reading and grammar given to all seniors. The average score of the students who studied a foreign language is much higher than the average score of those who did not.

Does this observation show that studying another language builds skill in English?

My answer would be:

The answer to the question posed is that it does not. Students will (in most cases at least) have decided whether to study a foreign language that is, it is their *personal choice* to do so, and, in my opinion, for many of them it is likely they will already be better at English than the average student. So, these students will differ in their average test scores for English but there can be no suggestion that studying a foreign language has caused this (see Chapter 6 for more about the issue of causality).

Moore goes on to indicate how a researcher might undertake an experiment to try and answer the question posed by ‘*directing half of the students in their school to a study a foreign language and deny the other half any contact with languages other than English’*. However, he then highlights the impracticality and unethical nature of such an experiment noting one is therefore ‘*left without a clear conclusion about whether a foreign language study cause better English skills*’.

Note: In Opie and Brown (2019) Chapter 1, there is a discussion of setting hypotheses with respect to positivist and interpretivist research. Arguably the above offers some research findings in the positivist tradition.

However, now let’s consider the hypothesis: ‘Students who are good at English do not find it easier to study another language’. The numerical data obtained earlier may be of use in providing support for this, but to answer it requires the undertaking of more interpretivist research. What would you do to try and get evidence to support or reject this hypothesis?

Moore, D.S. (1997) *Statistics – Concepts and Controversies* (4th edition). New York, NY: W.H. Freeman.

Opie, C. and Brown, D. (eds) (2019)*Getting Started in Your Educational Research: A Student’s Guide to Design, Data Production and Analysis*. London: Sage.