

# *Research-led teaching in phonetics: an exercise in research literacy*

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# RESEARCH-LED TEACHING IN PHONETICS: AN EXERCISE IN RESEARCH LITERACY

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## ABSTRACT

Research-led teaching can take a number of different forms, including training students in research methods, exposing students to research, and engaging students in it as participants [1].

This paper reports on an exercise to engage university students in phonetic research as part of a credit-bearing module by involving them in the research as participants and using an assessed reflective exercise to improve students' understanding of aspects of phonetic research, i.e., research design and data collection. This enabled students to evaluate not only the research methodology, but also their roles as participants and as prospective researchers, thus improving their research literacy.

**Keywords:** Research-led teaching.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, universities in the UK and elsewhere have become increasingly interested in the concept of 'research-led teaching' [1, 2, 4, 5]. At the University of Reading, for example, academic principles for programme and module design include the following [internal document]:

'Students and staff work together within a community of scholars. The curriculum engages students in research and enquiry throughout their studies. Students learn about current research in their discipline/s; engage in research discussions; are equipped to progressively develop their skills in research and enquiry; and pursue their own research and enquiry.'

This puts the onus on staff not only to expose students to relevant – and preferably recent – research and scholarship, but also to actively involve students in research in order to support and develop their academic skill set.

However, simply involving students in research is not enough. Experience from pedagogic practice in assessment and feedback has taught university lecturing staff that we need to work on students' assessment literacy [3] in order to support their ability

to truly learn and develop through the stages of their degree. The same is true of research-led teaching; scaffolding students' experience of involvement in research will support them in progressively develop their skills. I.e., academics should be active in developing students' research literacy.

This paper examines practice over a number of academic years in which students have taken part in phonetic research as partial assessment for the module *English in the World*. 10% of the assessment for this module involves students acting as research participants. However, students are not assessed on their ability to carry out the research itself, but on a guided reflective task undertaken once the data has been collected.

## 2. THE MODULE

### 2.1 Module and research study description

*English in the World* is an optional third year undergraduate module which runs in the spring term of the UK academic year. MA students are also invited to take this as an optional module, and it often attracts around 5-10 undergraduate Erasmus students. The module covers aspects such as the development of global Englishes, social, educational and political perspectives, and examines different varieties of English, including English-based pidgins and creoles. The aim is to widen students' understanding of the role of English as a global language and enable them to critically evaluate that role, looking at existing research in the field.

The assessment pattern is as follows:

1. Short data analysis assignment, describing the linguistic features of a variety of English (e.g., Indian English; Jamaican English). 30%.
2. Weekly multiple choice tests delivered via the virtual learning environment Blackboard, comprising 10 questions related to module reading. 10%.
3. Research study participation. 10%
4. A two hour exam, writing essay-style answers to two questions from a list of 5 options. 50%.

### 3. PROCEDURE

The research study has been a feature of the module since its inception in academic year 2006/2007, the idea being to expose students to varieties of Global English by asking them to examine specific features of one or more variety as a research participant. We would then discuss the research study in class and find out what students had learned about the variety they had been exposed to. Students have acted as participants in a number of differently-focused research projects in the area of phonetics and phonology in global Englishes, many of which have led to conference papers and journal articles.

Prior to academic session 2009/2010, the research study was an unassessed feature of the module. Despite this, students usually did the research and useful classroom discussion followed. In academic year 2008/2009, however, it became evident that students were reluctant to take part in any non-credit-bearing activity, as only two out of a class of 25 students completed the research study materials. When asked why, they reported that they did not feel motivated to complete it as it did not contribute to the final module mark. Attempts to persuade them of the benefits of taking part in the project – detailed exposure to a variety of English they were not familiar with to help inform class discussion – fell mainly on deaf ears that year.

This led me as tutor to re-evaluate the purpose of the research study as part of the module. I decided it was essential for students' development in research and enquiry, and that it should be incorporated into the assessment pattern. However, as well as scheduling part of a lecture to discuss the study and the variety, once completed, I decided to introduce a guided reflective activity to support their development as part of the phonetics research community.

#### 2.2 The research study as research-led teaching

I was very keen to ensure students were getting something of pedagogical value from their participation in the research study. Although, through our ethical consent procedures, the students can withdraw their data if they wish to as long as they complete the assessment cycle, completion of the tasks which result in the data itself is not what students are assessed on. Students are assessed on their ability to evaluate the process of being a participant in research, to evaluate the research study itself, and to reflect on what they have learned by taking part in the process. Brew [1] refers to this practice as engaging students in enquiry and learning rather than simply exposing students to research.

#### 3.1 Sequence of events

The materials for the research study in which students were involved in any given year was prepared prior to commencement of the module. As there have been several studies, and the studies themselves are not the focus of this paper, I will not give detailed information here. However, a list of some of the studies we have undertaken are listed below.

- Listening to other Englishes: British listeners on Hong Kong and Singapore speakers.
- The Hong Kong English accent: variation and acceptability.
- Juncture cues in Hong Kong, Singapore and British English.
- The production and perception of features of intonation and tonicity in Hong Kong and British English.
- Phonological development in the community language of Polish-English bilingual children of Polish migrants to the UK.

All studies were subject to ethical review by the University.

Students were given the research materials in Week 2 of spring term and asked to return them by Week 7. This was in order to give me and any additional members of the research team time to analyse at least a subsection of the results so they could be reported back to students in the last week of teaching (Week 11), during which time we would also discuss aspects of the variety/varieties they had been exposed to. Students were required to complete the reflective activity by the end of term, so it was not always possible to discuss their reflective comments during the last lecture.

#### 3.2 Reflective activity

Students were required to write a reflective passage, responding to guiding questions if they wished, and to post this on Blackboard in the Discussion Board area so other students could view it and comment on it if they wished. As they were assessed for this activity, it was necessary for them to reveal their names; i.e., students were not permitted to post anonymously to this assignment discussion board.

Students were given the following instructions:

*When you have completed all the tasks, write your reflective post on the following:*

1. *How straightforward was it to do the activities?*

2. *What did you find most interesting about taking part, and why?*
3. *What did you find most difficult?*
4. *What do you think the challenges are of setting up an experiment like this one?*
5. *If you were going to conduct this type of research, what would you change, and why?*
6. *Listening to the speakers doing this task, what are your impressions of them?*
7. *And finally: What do you think has been the most useful aspect of taking part in and reflecting on your participation in this project?*

I encouraged students to view and comment on each other's posts as part of their reflection. Comment by students happens only very rarely.

### 3.3 Marking scheme

The marking scheme for the research project assessment was as follows:

- Student has handed in the research materials and fully engaged with the reflective activity. 85%
- Student has handed in the research materials and engaged less fully with the activity. 55%
- Student has done the reflective activity but not handed in the research materials, or vice versa. 35%
- Student has completed neither part. 0%

Examples of a 'fully engaged' and 'less engaged' post are available for students to view. Students could withdraw their contribution to the research project after the completion of this exercise.

## 4. STUDENT RESPONSES

Students were told that they did not have to address the questions directly, but could post a passage incorporating responses to these general areas if they wished. The majority of them simply addressed the questions in the sequence presented in 3.2.

### 4.1 Question 1: How straightforward was it to do the activities?

The responses to this question varied mainly depending on the type of research activity the students were involved in that year. However, themes included the following:

- Instructions had been clear and so, even when the task was complex, they were able to work out what to do;

- Some of the terminology would not be known to participants outside the general field of Linguistics;
- If students had questions, access to the lecturer was easy and so questions could be addressed quickly.

### 4.2 Question 2: What did you find most interesting about taking part, and why?

I had anticipated that students might find the most interesting part to be simply the English of the stimuli speakers. However, their responses revealed that they had thought much more about the process of doing phonetic research. Examples include this one, from the study on Polish-English bilingual children:

*One of the things that I found interesting about this study was the idea of 'degree of transference'. Before the study, when the instructions were given out, I thought it was strange that we would have to assess the utterances in terms of foreign accent and felt it would be difficult to do so. However, after listening to the recordings, I realised I had been wrong and that it was easy to hear whether a child's realisation of an utterance sounded English, or was spoken with a foreign accent. [...] I also found it interesting to listen to the recordings in the role of a researcher as it demonstrated how difficult undertaking a research project is. I remember thinking that the process for the children I had assessed was time-consuming, so it highlighted the amount of time and effort a researcher dedicates to their studies.*

Here is an example from the project on listening to other Englishes:

*In my opinion, the most interesting part was the rating task, because I had to pay attention to specific features of the speakers' speech, such as the accent, the syllable length and the general prosody which usually remain unnoticed in everyday life even if they play such an important role in communication; this has been very stimulating for me, because the project gave me the opportunity of reflecting on my own speech features in order to complete the analysis, even if I am not a native speaker myself (my first language is Italian).*

I was particularly pleased when students said the experience of taking part in itself had been extremely beneficial.

### 4.3 Question 3: What did you find most difficult?

Although students mostly said the instructions had been clear under Question 1, one of the main themes

here was difficulty following the instructions. However, most students reported that the difficulty was transitional.

The other main theme here was dealing with the speech data itself. Sometimes the recordings were not very clear, and students had problems deciding how to code the speech, for example.

#### **4.4 Question 4: What do you think the challenges are of setting up an experiment like this one?**

Although the research studies varied quite a lot in design, students reported that the following might be a challenge:

- Finding stimuli speakers;
- Finding research participants (not a problem if they are students doing the study for partial credit but, in some cases, there were participants in other countries and the issue was raised about recruiting them);
- Non-homogeneity of the research participants;
- Liaising with researchers in other countries;
- Setting up the technical aspects of the studies (e.g., recording sound files, creating slide-shows, writing/adapting computer scripts);
- Dealing with children.

#### **4.5 Question 5: If you were going to conduct this type of research, what would you change, and why?**

In general, students reported that they would not change much. However, for the project on listening to Hong Kong and Singapore Englishes, where participants were asked to rate the speakers in comparison with a British English model, many students said they would have benefitted from having a recording of a British English speaker to compare the Hong Kong and Singapore samples with; their own internal voice and understanding of the phonology and pronunciation of a reference English accent was not enough.

For the Polish-English bilingual children project, students said they would attempt to obtain better recordings of the children, particularly trying to avoid having so much background noise, although they did admit it might not then be possible to record the children in a relaxed, familiar setting.

In studies where students were asked to rate speakers, some said they would prefer different mechanisms for doing so. For example, students preferred a Likert scale in comparison with one which had a 'Strongly agree – strongly disagree' continuum.

#### **4.6 Question 6: Listening to the speakers doing this task, what is your impression of them?**

Students tended to respond to this question in one of two ways: they would either comment on the proficiency of the speakers, or on how interesting it had been to listen to another variety of English.

In the study on the acceptability of the Hong Kong English accent, some students reported that they had felt uncomfortable rating the speakers for features such as likeability and how likely they were to have high-level jobs, saying this was not a linguistic judgement.

#### **4.7 Question 7: What do you think has been the most useful aspect of taking part in and reflecting on your participation in this project?**

This is the section under which I expected to see most evidence of the development of research literacy, and I was not disappointed. Comments included:

- It has given me an insight into the work that goes into a research project.
- It will help me structure my dissertation much more effectively.
- I have never really thought about (e.g., intonation) before in much detail and this has really helped me reflect on this aspect of English as a world language.
- I have never done anything like this before and now I have experience to draw on.
- It has challenged me to consider what aspects of speech are important in communication.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

I have valued the opportunity to re-work the research study assignment for *English in the World* to be a worthwhile exercise in the development of research literacy for my students. Building in the reflective activity has been vital in this respect. Without it, the exercise could look like gratuitous use of students as research participants. With it, research participation is turned into research reflection, meeting the aims of exposing students to a variety of Global English for discussion as part of the module and supporting their development as researchers in the phonetics community. Not all students have gone on to engage in phonetic research, but they all now have an idea of what a phonetics research project might look like, and have had the opportunity to reflect on how to undertake such a study, how to be a participant, and what they need to think about when designing research studies.

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