

## **What should go into an MA TEFL programme? Teachers' evaluations of the taught components of a sample programme.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the findings of an investigation into English language teachers' reactions to their in-service Master of Arts in TEFL, with a specific focus on taught programme components, and sociolinguistics in particular. In doing this, we reveal useful information on aspects of our MA programme that we can use for ongoing programme development, and also offer insights to other course providers on the role that different applied English linguistics topics might occupy in such programmes.*

### **Introduction**

#### *Background*

This paper reports on the findings of the general evaluation part of part of a longer survey that aimed ultimately to focus on teachers' attitudes towards the language variation components of their sociolinguistics course as part of their MA TEFL programme. Sociolinguistics, which is made up of ten units (see figure 1), is singled out here for comparison with other courses in the programme. The detailed findings of the language variation section of the survey are reported elsewhere (Edwards and Owen, 2003). The focus on sociolinguistics was motivated by a suspicion aroused by routine feedback from students that this topic may be among the least popular currently on offer, and its inclusion as a compulsory element might therefore need to be reviewed. Future studies might replicate this work, but focus on different applied linguistics topics.

Language teacher education programmes typically include the topic of *sociolinguistics*, at least as an option and sometimes as a compulsory element. What this includes, and how much of any programme it occupies, varies a lot. It may be found as a named unit within traditional modules (as at the University of Birmingham), or as a 'topic' or 'theme' in

more enticingly named packages involving some combination of words such as ‘discourse’, ‘culture’, ‘society’, ‘social’, ‘context’, like Burns and Coffin’s (2001) *Analysing English in a Global Context*, or more widely disseminated throughout a programme even if it is not specifically named. In recent years, even introductory texts on language awareness aimed at pre-experience teachers have felt the need to include the topic among their contents (see, for example, Arndt et al, 2000: 33 - 7 and 131 - 51). Instruction may address regional variation (accent, dialect etc.), standard and non-standard forms, sociolects, creoles, speech/writing differences, variation according to social situation (formality/informality etc.), gender, literary vs. non-literary English, English as an International Language, language planning and policy issues, This is by no means an exhaustive list.

We assume that programme designers include sociolinguistics for well-motivated reasons. Possibly, they concur with writers such as Llamas and Stockwell (2002:166), who assert that ‘teachers who are aware of the sociolinguistic context have insights at their disposal which can make them better teachers’, or McKay and Hornberger (1996:ix), who claim that teachers need ‘an understanding of the relationship between language and society’ in order to fulfil ‘the challenging task of respecting linguistic diversity while promoting common standards’. It is more likely, however, that they are intuitively encouraged by the naturally high level of student-teacher interest in sociolinguistics.

There are probably also less obvious reasons for including it, which have less to do with idealisations of what teacher-training should be about, and more to do with administrative imperatives. In any organisation providing teacher education, particularly university departments, a range of expertise is on offer. Usually there is someone interested in sociolinguistics, but this person is not necessarily an experienced language teacher. Their expertise is still used, since not to do so would have undesirable practical implications for the organisation. It is assumed that students will be able to internalise non-applied but interesting instruction in such a way that it will still be of practical value later. But this is a big assumption. One of our student respondents notes, ‘I thought the ideas of the ... course were significantly important to my interests as an EFL teacher, but there was not much of a pedagogical focus there ...’, and another, even more bluntly, confesses, ‘Honestly I still cannot tell how I could apply these ideas to my classroom practice.’ Could our course writers have taken greater pains to make pedagogical applications and implications more

explicit? It is clear that *how* sociolinguistics is taught is as important as *whether* it is taught.

### *Subjects and research questions*

The subjects are graduates and current (near-completion) students of the MA TESL/TEFL open distance learning programme at the University of Birmingham, an in-service programme for teachers employed around the world. What do they remember of their programme? How do they rate each element against the other taught courses they were offered? Are they now conscious of these topics having made a difference to the way they teach English? What kind of difference? And as a result of our findings, should we reconsider our inclusion of particular courses as compulsory topics in their programme, or at least review how we present them?

### *Expected outcomes*

As the teachers participating in the programme all remained in-service throughout their studies, they benefited from the opportunity to immediately apply what they were learning on an ongoing basis. Although the practical circumstances facing teachers who return to their country from overseas training frequently nullify or considerably weaken the effect of knowledge they have acquired during training, we hypothesised that in-service teachers would show evidence of being able to adapt and integrate new ideas into their professional practice as they were learning *in situ*. This group should, more than any other, be able to report any practical benefits of instruction in various topics. However, the relationship between instruction and language teaching would probably turn out to be unclear.

### **Methodological issues**

Any attempt to evaluate the *post-hoc* impact of a programme raises many methodological issues. Among these we can mention:

- sampling – how representative, or generalisable, will the findings be?
- response rate – how can this best be maximised?
- data collection techniques – what types of instrument or technique will efficiently and reliably elicit the information required?
- ease of collation and quantification of results
- interpretation of responses – quantitative and qualitative

To evaluate the impact of a certain kind of teaching, it might seem obvious to ask the recipients of that teaching for their views; and we have certainly done this. We approached 148 former and current students and analysed the responses of the 86 who responded. As we shall see, the overall student response to our programme is, on balance, favourable. How far this reflects 'reality' is less clear. While students are very well qualified to give an opinion, they are not necessarily the only people whose opinions matter. We have not approached employers, still less the English learners who are taught by our students. Would they consider it important for teachers to be informed about language variation? Do their views count? Such questions might be investigated in future work.

We think our response rate is satisfactory, but it is inevitably true that sampling may fail to pick up the full range of opinion. Do negatively inclined students simply ignore the questionnaire? Are the ones who respond also the ones with most time on their hands, the most conscientious or the ones who established good personal relations with staff? Such questions are always in the back of the researcher's mind, but they are fairly typical potential sources of unreliability, which can only be addressed by replication and accumulation of findings. An even more problematic issue is the generalisability of our findings to the sector as a whole. Although at 59, the number of complete questionnaire returns we received is sufficiently large to form a statistically valid sample for quantitative analysis, it might be that the validity of the responses is restricted to our particular programme, and of no consequence elsewhere. As we shall argue, we do not believe this to be the case, but once again replication is the way forward.

We chose as our subject group only those teachers who had participated in our open distance learning programme, since although we contacted a number of cohorts in order to obtain a reasonably large number of returns, all cohorts had completed an essentially identical programme, this having been provided as a series of course booklets and sets of supplementary readings to be worked through independently. Full-time students from different, campus-based cohorts would almost certainly have experienced subtly different classes even if taught by the same lecturers from year to year, as adjustments were made to the courses and class discussions led it these in different directions. This meant that our subject group comprised English teachers working in a number of countries around the world, notably Japan and South Korea, so we would not be able to conduct face-to-face

interviews or directly observe the teachers engaged in aspects of their professional practice. In addition, inviting video or audio recording of lessons, or submitting copies of teaching or planning materials would place a heavy demand on already busy people and would be unlikely to produce a good response rate. We therefore concluded that a straightforward self-report instrument was likely to elicit a more acceptable response rate, and decided that our primary instrument would be a questionnaire. Although self-report is notoriously unreliable for some purposes, it is perfectly appropriate for a study that asks for introspection into issues such as relevance of a topic to professional practice. On matters such as how respondents used insights gained from their course in their classroom teaching, or other aspects of their professional practice such as designing tests or syllabuses, we would simply have to trust their own accounts, since verification of these through direct observation was precluded for reasons already given.

### *Questionnaire design*

The questionnaire was designed to elicit ratings for all twelve of the taught courses offered to the participants as part of their MA programme, partly in order to ultimately reveal how language variation was rated in relation to other components, but also to disguise the true focus of the study. The meaning of questionnaire responses is notoriously hard to interpret. The 'leading question effect' is a particular source of unreliability; the wording of questions too easily predisposes respondents to answer in certain ways. Asking subjects to comment on our teaching of language variation, without setting that topic in a broader context, would almost certainly be inadequate because perceptions of the worth of any course element are bound to be relative. In the light of these well-known problems with questionnaire research, our aim here was to disguise the focus on language variation by burying questions about it in a larger survey of responses to our courses. Indeed, many students responded as if to a course evaluation exercise, in spite of it being clearly labelled 'research', and it is this broader survey that we report on here.

Section A asked for basic demographic information so we could check, for example, whether respondents were still teaching English (all those who completed this item were). Section B solicited opinion on all our modules, and was designed to check how much respondents remembered of their programme (which courses they took, how much of each course they completed) and how they rated each main programme component (how

important they felt each course to be and how much they gained from it). We report the results of this section below.

Subjects were then invited to ‘select’ in section C one of three modules for further comment. Only one of these, sociolinguistics, had in fact been part of their curriculum. The other two, psycholinguistics and semantics, were fictitious, but we judged that students would be unlikely to realise this (as some of their unsolicited comments proved), and that they would therefore believe they were making a conscious choice when selecting sociolinguistics for further comment. This design feature necessitated the duplication of much of the questionnaire for the fictitious modules. The whole questionnaire, including the ‘dummy’ pages can be viewed on the web site<sup>1</sup>. Only two people attempted to respond to the ‘dummy’ courses: one accompanied their response with a comment expressing uncertainty about whether they had studied this topic, while the other merely noted that the extra two courses looked interesting and would be welcome as optional additions to the programme. In this way, Section C homed in on language variation by stealth, and asked respondents to rate each of ten sociolinguistics sub-topics (see figure 1), as defined by their course units for five qualities: interest, relevance to work, ease of understanding, novelty and ability to relate to classroom practice. A number of open response opportunities were also given which, if taken, would help us to interpret the tallied rating scores, and which may also throw light on attitudes towards sociolinguistics in general. Five of the ten sociolinguistics topics offered for rating could be included under the heading ‘language variation’. The findings for this part of the survey are reported in Edwards and Owen, 2003. Although not reported in detail here, the findings of the open comment sections are also alluded to in the conclusion to this report.

<b>Part A: Language variation</b>	<b>Part B: Language planning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accent and dialect</li> <li>• Pidgins, creoles and new Englishes</li> <li>• Language and use / register</li> <li>• Language and gender</li> <li>• Cross cultural communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is language policy / planning?</li> <li>• Why plan languages?</li> <li>• Language planning and ELT</li> <li>• How EAL/EIL situations influence the ELT curriculum</li> <li>• Linguistic / cultural imperialism</li> </ul>

**Figure 1: The ten components of the sociolinguistics course**

An outline of the questionnaire is given below.

### Section A. Background

Name  
Title of programme  
Programme start date ##  
(Predicted) graduation date ##  
Mode (part-time, full-time etc) @  
Occupation before starting programme  
(Predicted) occupation after finishing programme



### Section B. Overview (4 sub-sections)

1. Which of the following courses constituted a part of your MA programme and which did you actually complete? (ie work through at least 80% of the material or attend at least 80% of the classes? ###
2. How important was it to you, as a language teaching professional, that these courses were part of your MA programme? ### How much did you gain from each course in terms of your professional development? ###
3. Questions 2 and 3 asked you about *your* opinion and experience. Thinking more generally, if you were running an MA TEFL (or similar), how would you rate the importance of the different courses for inclusion in the programme? ###

*[Each of these questions was followed by a list of 20 courses and open sections for entry of up to two further course names. Subjects could select from a pull-down menu a suitable response for each named course. A section at the end of each list allowed open comments.]*



### Section C. Details of a selected course (sociolinguistics)

1. Which of these three courses did you study as a core course? //
  2. Please choose ONE course which you studied as a core course on which to answer further questions @  
*[Choice of sociolinguistics, semantics, psycholinguistics]*
  3. i) The course I chose in 2) above should be [compulsory / optional / can't decide]  
ii) Why do you think this?
  4. Were there clear links between this course and others on the programme? If yes, which other courses?
  5. Did this course fit well with the overall aims of the programme?
  6. Did you write an assessed assignment on a topic covered by this course? The precise topic was ... / I instead wrote an assignment on ...
  7. Broadly speaking, the course was divided into two main areas, PART A language variation and PART B language planning. Which did you find most useful? Why?
  8. Within sociolinguistics there are a number of sub-topics (units, classes etc). For each of these sub-topics, please select the column which best describes how you feel.
    - i) I found the topic interesting @
    - ii) This topic is relevant to my work @
    - iii) The topic was easy to understand @
    - iv) The ideas presented to on this topic were new @
    - v) I can relate ideas covered by this topic to my classroom practice @
- [Each of these questions was followed by a list of 10 sub-topics. Subjects could select a suitable response for each sub-topic from a four-point 'radio button' Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. A section at the end of each list allowed open explanatory comments.]*
9. For one of the topics which you gave high ratings to above, please explain in what ways the topic is useful and / or relevant to you.
  10. Any other comments on the sociolinguistics course?

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire, which is no longer live, can be viewed at <http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/cels/questionnaire>.

Key: @ Question followed by a list with radio buttons (only one can be selected)  
// Question followed by a list with tick boxes (more than one can be selected)  
# Question followed by a pull-down menu from which one response is selected  
##### Question followed by a series of pull-down menus, one response is selected from each

## Figure 2: Outline of questionnaire structure and contents

Potential subjects (148 graduates and near-completion current students) were invited by email to complete the questionnaire online or to fill in an emailed text version and return this by email, fax or post. It was hoped that by offering a variety of modes of return the response rate would be maximised.

We designed our questionnaire to be completed and returned on a web site because this has clear advantages, not only for busy people living thousands of miles away but just as importantly for us, because the responses for statistical analysis could be downloaded automatically to a database. The practicalities of this web-based questionnaire were solved by a helpful computer officer, but there were a number of difficulties along the way.<sup>2</sup> Some potential respondents gave up in frustration when the web site did not initially function correctly. Several (31) took the trouble to print out the backup text version of the questionnaire and submit a paper, faxed, or emailed text version instead. This means there is a slight lack of uniformity in the way in which the questionnaire was administered, but we do not believe this affected the results. Computerisation does not entirely eliminate the usual problems of partial or erroneous completion. Despite these caveats, the web-based questionnaire yielded a good body of information, and we see this as a positive step forward in course evaluation.

## Results

### *Return rates: The perils of technology*

Once a suitable number of subjects had been identified, emails were sent out to all but the very few for whom we could not obtain an email address, inviting response via the web-based questionnaire, or by completing the rich-text format document attached to the email for return electronically, by fax or by post. By far the largest number (72) of the 125 teachers successfully contacted attempted to complete the web-based questionnaire but it soon became apparent that there were serious problems with the operation of the

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<sup>2</sup> We are extremely grateful to Mr Mark Connop of the University of Birmingham School of Humanities for his help in creating the web-based questionnaire for this project.



questionnaire that had not emerged during trialing, caused by some responses exceeding the maximum number of characters allowed in any given field, and reported by at least twenty would-be respondents.

Eventually the problem was identified and corrected, but in the meantime, many of the subjects had made multiple attempts at completing the form online (one teacher tried seven times) and others completed the RTF document version for return by email, or in a few cases, fax. This meant we had to enter data received by email, fax or post into the web questionnaire ourselves, and delete the multiple entries from the database before processing, thus wasting precious time that we had hoped that using an electronic questionnaire would save. Even after chasing up respondents who had only partially completed the questionnaire before running into problems, we ended up with 86 partial and just 59 fully completed questionnaires. Thus a return rate of 69% (which we consider to be very satisfactory given the remote locations of respondents and the time lapse of up to three years since many had last been contacted by us) was reduced to 48% fully useable returns.

It is worth noting that against expectations, the overall return rates for graduates were not lower than for teachers still enrolled on the programme (see column 8 of table 1 below), but if the total *potential* return rates are calculated, ie the teachers for whom we no longer had a valid contact address are included in the calculation (see column 9), then the return rate for graduates is indeed lower. Researchers planning to undertake similar studies may wish to consider to what extent it is worth trying to contact potential respondents with whom they have not corresponded for more than two years, given the likely failure rate of communication attempts, although once contacted, most people were remarkably willing to persist with attempts to get their data to us in spite of obstacles.

**Table 1: Questionnaire return rates**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Subjects by graduation date	Total in cohort*	Not contacted <sup>#</sup>	Email bounced	No reply	Response received	Total contacted <sup>§</sup>	% returns of total contacted	% returns of total cohort
Dec 1999	7	0	1	3	3	6	50%	43%
July 2000	23	0	10	7	6	13	46%	26%
Dec 2000	21	0	5	3	13	16	81%	62%
July 2001	17	1	3	3	10	13	77%	59%
Dec 2001	13	0	1	2	10	12	83%	77%

<b>Total graduates</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>52%</b>
July 2002	26	0	0	12	14	26	54%	54%
Dec 2002	31	1	1	7	22	29	76%	71%
July 2003	8	0	0	2	6	8	75%	75%
Dec 2003	2	0	0	0	2	2	100%	100%
<b>Total current<sup>@</sup></b>	<b>67</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>66%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>58%</b>

\* In fact there were many more students in the cohorts due to graduate in July and December 2003 than shown here, but only a few of these had reached the stage of having completed the sociolinguistics course. Only the latter group are included in the study.

# either because no email address was available or because, in the case of current students, they were on leave of absence due to illness.

\$ ie an email message was sent and assumed delivered since no 'mail undeliverable' message was bounced back.

@ Students who had completed the sociolinguistics element of the programme but not yet graduated.

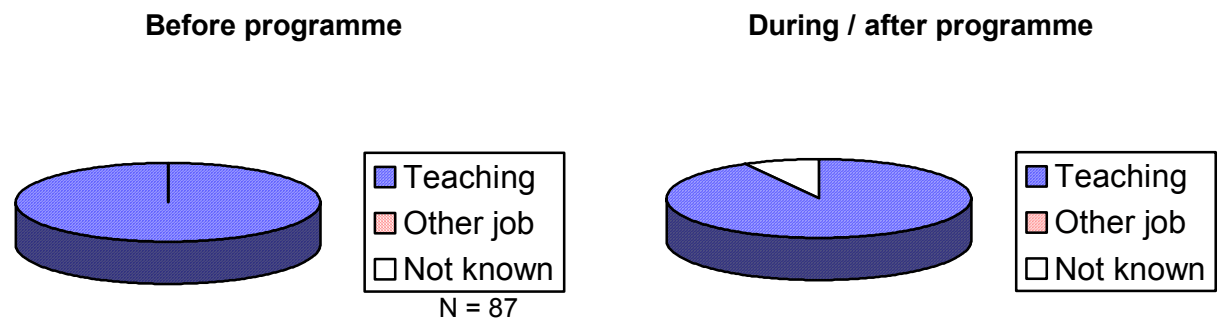
Return rates are calculated on the basis of those who responded together with those from whom there was no reply of any kind (i.e. the 23 for whom 'bounced' emails were received, or for whom there was no email address, were excluded from the calculation, reducing the original subject base from 148 to 125).

### *The questionnaire results*

Questionnaire driven response patterns, where detected, must give rise to caution about attaching conclusive significance to findings, especially where basic errors are possible. For example, in Section A, which simply asked respondents for information such as entry date to their programme, graduation date, and what occupation they were engaged in before and after the programme, six gave incorrect dates – easily done given the use of 'pull-down' lists of dates on the web version of the questionnaire which could be 'mis-clicked'. Given that much of the questionnaire used the same mechanism, all the results should be interpreted with the awareness that around five per cent of responses may not be the ones the respondents intended – a phenomenon far less likely to arise with the use of traditional hard copies of questionnaires.

Section A allowed us to establish that before starting the programme, all 86 of the respondents to this section had been teaching languages (all but one English) in a wide range of public and private sector institutions, at various levels and age-groups and in various countries, and on both part- and full-time bases. Many held more than one part-time post. After graduating, 24 were still in the same posts, 55 were still teaching languages but had moved to new jobs or even new countries, and eight did not respond

(four had already graduated, but it is possible the other four had no definite plans for their post-graduation careers).



**Figure 3: Subjects' occupations before and after the programme**

This suggests that any comments made on subsequent sections of the questionnaire concerning the relationship between the topic of language variation and classroom practice would carry the authority of professional experience. It should also be noted that six respondents indicated that they had taken a 'mixed-mode' programme – that is, they had studied full-time in Birmingham for part of their programme, so would not have followed the distance version of the sociolinguistics course, so the data for these was excluded from charts and calculations.

Section B consisted of four sub-sections which allowed us to see how accurately respondents remembered the composition of their twelve-course programme (question 1: 'Which courses constituted a part of your MA programme, and which did you actually complete?') and to compare how they rated each of the courses they claimed to have followed in terms of personal importance, professional gain and general importance (questions 2 to 4). In questions 1 to 3, there was some tendency to erroneously respond on the five courses that did exist for students on other programmes at Birmingham, but which we know the respondent did not follow. Twenty three (29%) thought that they had followed 'Research methods in applied linguistics' as a core course, almost certainly having confused this with a course they did follow, ie Classroom research and research methods, while a few people (five) even responded for some of the three non-existent, fabricated courses. However, on average the number of these mis-responses was not a cause for concern, and most respondents correctly avoided commenting on courses they had not followed, as shown by figure 4 below. Furthermore, as figure 5 shows, the vast

majority (nearly 90%) correctly remembered which twelve courses comprised their programme, suggesting that their memories were reliable.

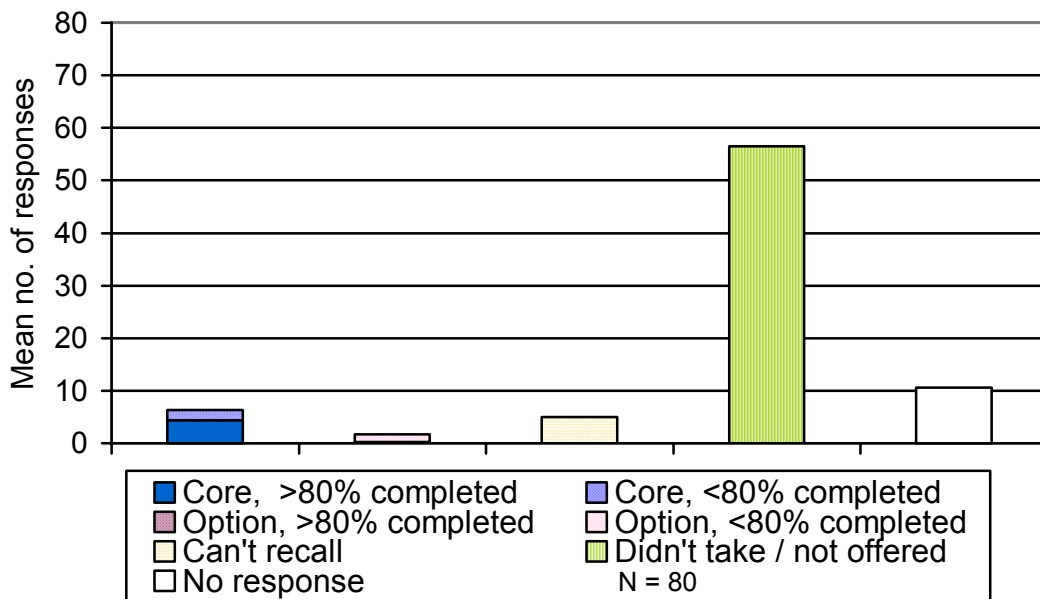


Figure 4: Mean number of people claiming to have taken the eight courses *not* offered as part of the part-time distance learning MA programme<sup>3</sup>

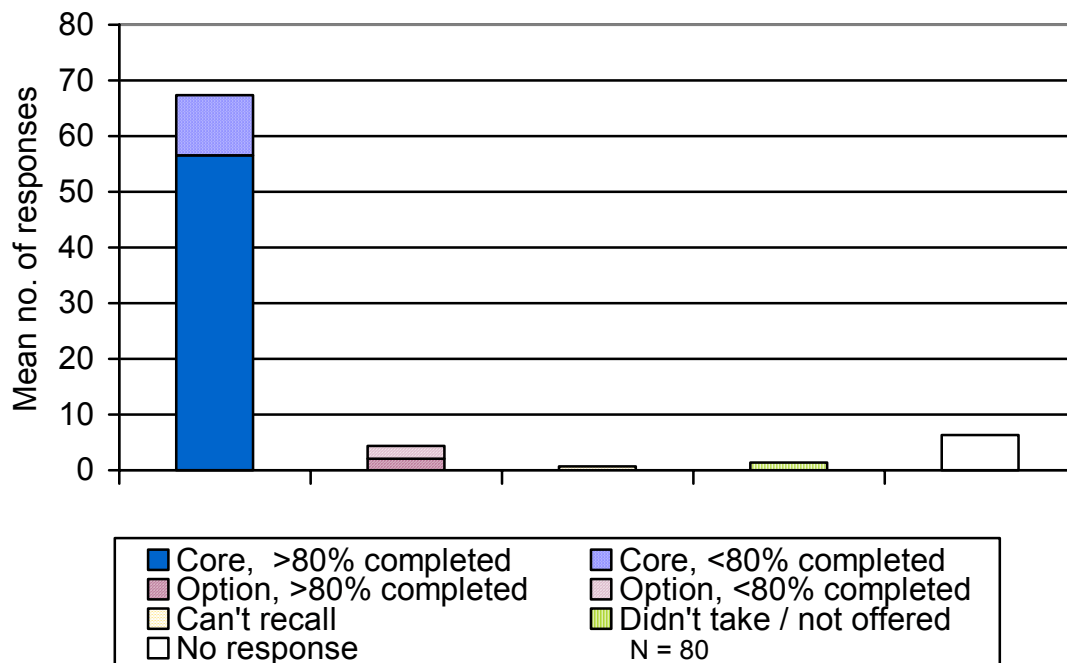


Figure 5: Mean number of people claiming to have taken the twelve courses that *did* constitute the part-time distance learning MA programme<sup>4</sup>

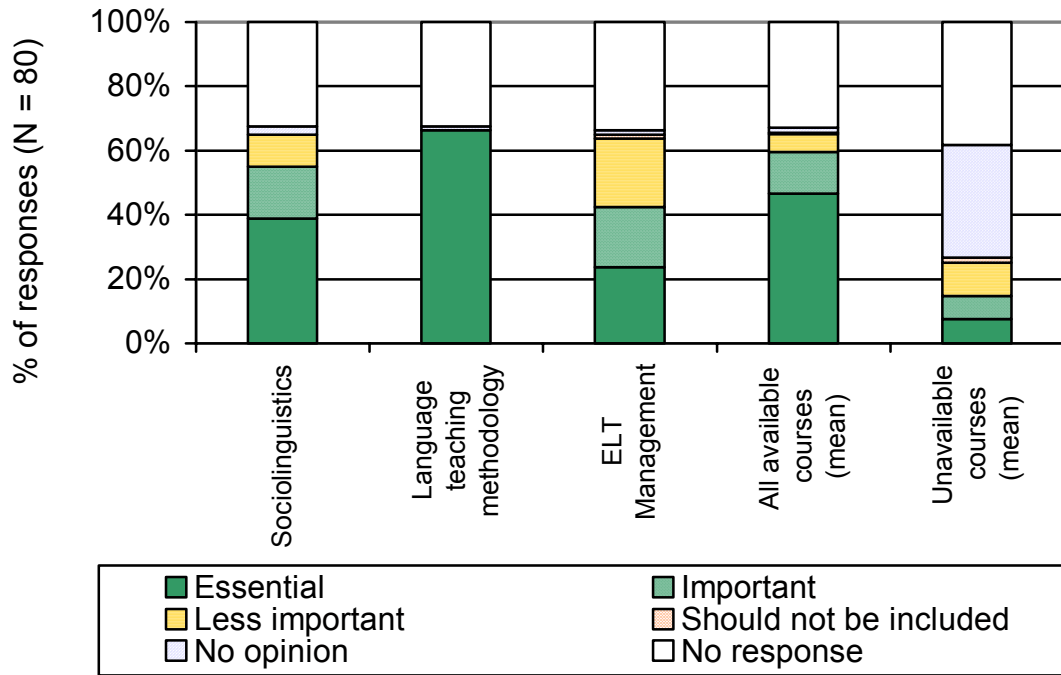
<sup>3</sup> The five courses that were offered to students following the full-time or 'mixed mode' versions of the MA programme (whose data has been excluded from this chart), but *not* available to part-time distance students, were Research methods in applied linguistics; English for specific purposes; Functional grammar; Genre analysis; Corpus linguistics. The three fictional courses were Psycholinguistics; Semantics and Semiotics.

Of the twenty-eight people who wrote comments at the end of this part of section B, two listed the courses that they had enjoyed most, with both including sociolinguistics in their lists. The remaining comments were mainly to clarify what they meant by ‘I completed at least 80%’ etc, or to say which course the respondents wished they *had* been able to do, and do not merit a detailed report here.

Figure 6 summarises the main findings for the second question in section B (‘How important it was to you, as a language teaching professional, that these courses were part of your MA programme?’). The scores for sociolinguistics are presented in comparison with the course rated of greatest personal importance (language teaching methodology) and least importance (ELT management) as well as the mean ratings for all twelve available and eight unavailable courses. As can be seen, sociolinguistics fares reasonably well, with just below average scores as an essential programme component. It should be noted that it was from this point on in the web version of the questionnaire that technical problems arose, which explains the high number of ‘no responses’ in this and subsequent charts. Excluding these (ie taking N = 54) produces an even higher (55%) return for sociolinguistics as an essential component compared with the average for available courses of 60%.

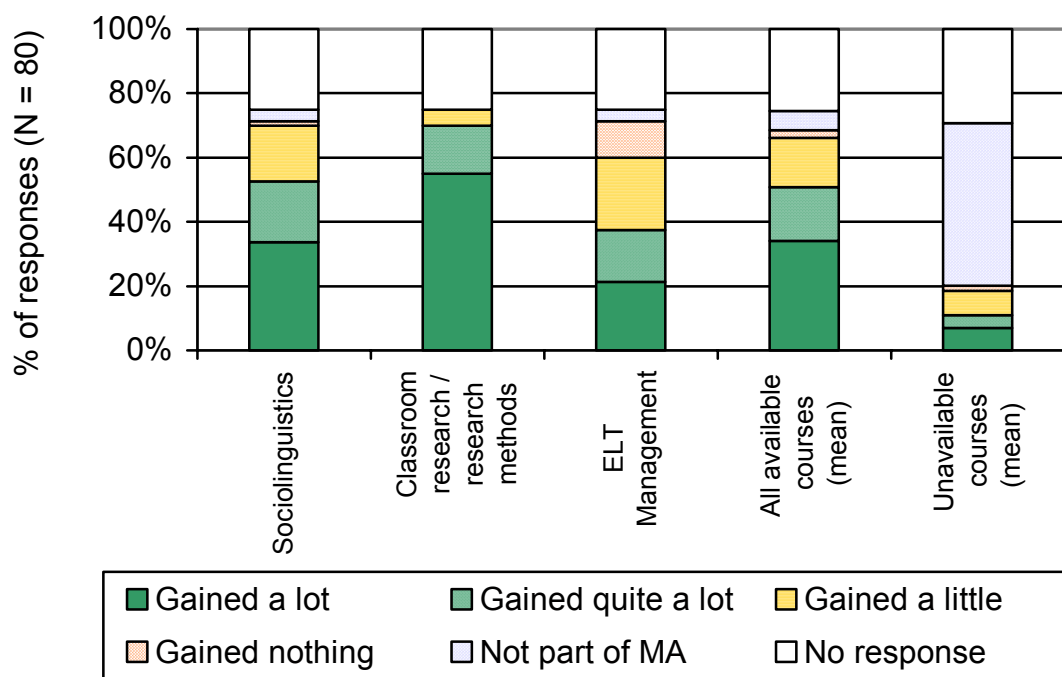
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<sup>4</sup> The twelve courses were all core courses (ie compulsory) and would have been taken by all 80 part-time distance respondents. The courses were: Classroom research and research methods; Language teaching methodology; Second language acquisition; Pedagogic grammar; Syllabus and materials; Lexis, Phonology, Spoken discourse, Testing, Written discourse, Sociolinguistics and ELT management. N = 80 for this chart.



**Figure 6: Personal importance ratings for sociolinguistics compared with other courses.**

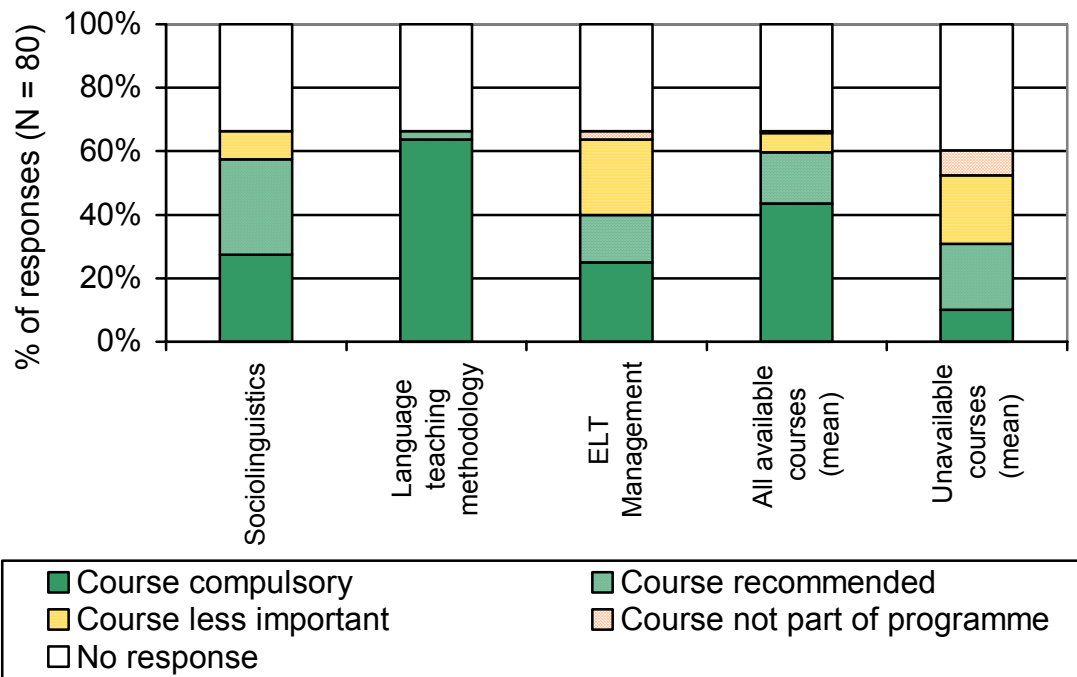
The third question in section B (‘How much did you gain from each course in terms of your professional development?’) elicits a less enthusiastic response across the board, but sociolinguistics nevertheless manages a 34% score in the ‘I gained a lot from this course’ category, compared with 36% for all available courses, and when the ‘I gained quite a lot category’ is added, it can be seen that sociolinguistics is valued by 53% of the cohort. This can be compared in figure 7 with the course rated as most valuable – in this case, classroom research and research methods, which narrowly beat methodology into second place with 70% - and, and the once again languishing ELT management with only 38% combined score for the top two categories.



**Figure 7: Professional development gain ratings for sociolinguistics compared with other courses.**

We also asked, in question 4 of section B, how important respondents felt each course to be in more general terms, eg if they would include them if planning a similar programme, and here the response pattern was interesting. Generally we found that subjects would be less likely to include topics they had not themselves studied. At first sight this is gratifying – we must be teaching the right things. On the other hand, we know that at least one of the fictitious modules, psycholinguistics, is widely taught in some guise or other on similar programmes. In principle, its absence from our curriculum could be seen as a major gap. However, there were relatively few students who indicated that they would like to see this topic included as either a compulsory or recommended course (28%). By the same token, some of the topics taught at Birmingham are likely to be quite distinctive of our approach, lexis being a good example. We suspect that very few, if any, comparable programmes at other institutions include whole modules called ‘lexis’. Interestingly, this topic would be included as a compulsory or recommended course by 61% of our students if they were putting together a programme. Sociolinguistics once again gets a respectable, if not outstanding rating with 58% including it in their ‘must-have’ list, compared with the all-course mean of 59% (see figure 8). Not surprisingly, given the title of the programme, language teaching methodology once again tops the charts with 66% (or 100% of those who responded to this item) in the top two categories, and ELT management again comes in last with an unimpressive 40%. In fact just one course from the list of unavailable

courses, research methods in applied linguistics, manages to beat this score with a return of 45%.



**Figure 8: General importance ratings for sociolinguistics compared with other courses.**

Could these good approval ratings for our existing suite of courses be taken as approval of our students' learning experience generally, rather than approval of learning about a particular field of knowledge? It is of note that, in section C, a number of respondents admitted to knowing little or nothing about sociolinguistics until they took the course, which helps to explain why some currently unavailable courses, such as semiotics, were given the thumbs down as potential curriculum items: 'I even had to go away and check what semiotics is', confesses one confused respondent, while another writes, 'I am not actually sure what Genre Analysis is'. On the other hand, one person who returned his responses by post had included the sections for the fake semantics and psycholinguistics courses and written in large red characters on these, 'Looks very interesting. I would have liked this as an option for study.' Another writes:

Sorry but I feel uncomfortable again in answering some of these questions. There were parts of a course that were great and some that should be cut out. Here, though, I have to answer about the course as a whole which is very hard to do. There may be a class that simply needs to be rearranged or rewritten but I feel should definitely be kept, but I am given no option to state so (i.e. "This course would be essential / compulsory if significantly modified"). In addition, I am not comfortable having to make a selection (i.e. "This course would be essential / compulsory") about a course, Research Methods in Applied Linguistics or Semiotics, for example, that I've never taken or seen the syllabus for. There should be an option for "Don't know", or "It sounds like a class I would like to take".



While another places the responsibility back onto our shoulders:

I have another problem here in defining 'my MA program', I would like to imagine that your curriculum design revolves around my needs and whims, but I can't really see it. It's your job to decide what is essential to become a rounded professional, and mine to reach them. If it were up to me we'd all study the things I'm good at and leave it at that. I'm too tempted to trash those things I didn't enjoy. So I'll resist and leave it as I found it.

There were numerous other comments in both sections B and C of the questionnaire, which we do not have space to reproduce here, indicating that a majority of teachers found at least some aspects of their sociolinguistics course to be of direct relevance to their teaching, or to personal circumstances as ex-patriots and language learners. However, there was a great variety of examples of applications given, suggesting that application is very individual in nature. There was also a significant minority who were happy to support sociolinguistics on the grounds that it was interesting, but complained that they could not see any direct relevance to their professional practice. Members of this group were far more likely to vote for a redesignation of sociolinguistics to optional status (see below), and seemed to hold a fairly narrow, functional view of the purpose of their programme.

The general conclusion we must draw is that students found their courses to be, on the whole, appropriate, and are reluctant to trade satisfactory courses for those which they know little about. However, one frequent comment made concerns the possibility of selecting options, or elective courses:

It was a pity that I did not have any optional course as I learned through ODL

I didn't have any choice in what courses I took. I would have liked to take some of the others offered through the on campus program. ie. Psycholinguistics, Corpus Linguistics. etc

Many of these courses were not offered as part of the distance programme in Korea. I selected the "no opinion" option for all of these but would have certainly liked the opportunity to have taken a few of them in my course of study. Perhaps if I do a PhD...

I wish we had been offered 'Psycholinguistics' and 'English for Specific Purpose' courses.

Since undertaking this study we have indeed introduced options to the programme, with two of the three least popular of the original twelve courses revealed in this study (phonology and testing) now offered as options alongside functional grammar, corpus linguistics, introduction to translation studies, with more on the way.

A central purpose of the course evaluation aspect of this project was to decide whether we should reconsider our inclusion of sociolinguistics as a compulsory topic in the

programme, or at least review how we present it. Judging from the significant minority who were not strongly appreciative of the subject, we should certainly consider making the course optional although at present we have no plans to do so: there were other, less popular or less useful courses (ELT management, phonology, testing) that should be 'relegated' before sociolinguistics is made optional. Furthermore, the arguments (not presented here) from both staff and students for retaining the topic as a compulsory course are persuasive, and on balance, we feel that most students would benefit from the course even if it did not rank as their favourite. There is a particular danger, too, that many students would miss the opportunity to even find out if they *did* like the topic or not, given the number who said they were totally unfamiliar with it before the programme, and that far fewer would select this than might be suggested by the number of supporters recorded *after* having studied it. One solution would be to redesign our programme completely to include an introductory, overview module, that gave participants 'tasters' of a wide range of applied linguistics topics (including sociolinguistics), some of which could then be selected as optional, more advanced level courses later on. However, this has huge implications for the programme, and until we conduct a complete and in-depth programme review this is not a practical suggestion.

We conclude, therefore, that sociolinguistics should be retained as a core course on our MA TEFL programme, with any review focussing on making more explicit the practical applications of the topic to cater for those teachers who take a more functional view of course aims. So although this will displease the teacher who wrote as his final comment:

- It is not good to bring personal politics into the classroom (however unavoidable). If such activities are even slightly sanctioned by educational authorities such license is sure to be abused by those who have an agenda.

numerous others, such as the authors of these comments, will no doubt be delighted:

- I'm wondering why you've focussed on sociolinguistics in this questionnaire. I hope that it won't be removed from the course. Not only did I personally find it very enjoyable and thought provoking, but it also challenged some of my own teaching practices, which is, I think, a very healthy thing. It also helped me to realise how far reaching what I do in the classroom can potentially be.
- I understand why you put this course last - it helps spark new enthusiasm when one is about burned out.
- More...more...more. I am so moved by this subject that I think it warrants my pursuing it as a PhD
- This was my favorite of all courses!
- Please do not delite (sic) this course from module 6!
- Keep it!

## **Conclusion**

We conclude from our study that factors of individual circumstance and interest play a major role in determining whether sociolinguistics topics are useful or relevant to English language teachers, and this will be true of teachers on other programmes too. It is also likely that the substantial base-level of support for the topic will be typical – there is no reason why our group of teachers should be special in this respect. To find only or one or two from a cohort of more than eighty who have a strong dislike of the subject is a significant finding, even taking into account our ‘dwindling data phenomenon’ (we started with 125 potential participants, which by the end of the questionnaire had reduced to 61 sets of comments and just 48 sets of ratings). For the vast majority, whether native or non-native speaker of English, and regardless of teaching context, differences of opinion are a matter of degree rather than of nature. Nearly all our teachers approve of the inclusion of sociolinguistics as part of their programme; it is just that some approve more than others, and for a variety of reasons, some to do with practical benefits, and others less tangible. Therefore, although we do so knowing that our findings may simply reflect a case of familiarity breeding contentment, we will retain sociolinguistics as a part of our programme for the foreseeable future.

We are confident that our findings here are generalisable, at least to other masters level programmes for English language teachers, and we hope that replication studies will demonstrate this. We also suspect that similar in-depth scrutiny of specific topics other than sociolinguistics would reveal a similar range of explanations for the support of, or ambivalence towards, these topics. Course planners can never satisfy all of the people all of the time; they can, however, establish in overall terms whether their student body approves of the inclusion of a particular topic, and they can make efforts to address any shortcomings in the presentation of a course that such studies may reveal.

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