

## Teaching Practices and Student Learning in the Introductory Research Methods Class

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper was to investigate graduate students' experiences in a research methods course in an international context. The study first aimed at describing how graduate students in language at the American University of Beirut (AUB) are introduced to research by providing a detailed description of the course and secondly at exploring how these students react to and reflect on their experience in the research methods course. Semi-structured interviews with the seven students who were enrolled in the course in 2005 were conducted in February 2006. The results of the data analysis revealed five major categories: (a) aspects of the course the students found beneficial; (b) aspects of the course the students would like to change; (c) how the course changed students' views of research; (d) how the course changed students' research practices; and (e) views of first- vs. second-year graduate students. Based on the findings, several conclusions as well as specific pedagogical recommendations were made.

### Introduction

Although graduate students often feel anxious about research methodology courses and may delay taking such courses for as long as possible (Sanders, 2001; Trimarco, 1997), research investigating the effectiveness of these courses has generally revealed that they have positive effects on students' research practices and their expectations about research. For instance, based on a study of 109 graduate students at a university in New York, which investigated the anxieties, expectations, and the mastery of research and statistics prior to and after the completion of a research methods course, Trimarco (1997) concludes that students' expectations and skills benefited from the research course; it especially helped female students to gain confidence in their ability to understand and use research.

Similarly, Green and Kvidhal (1990) explored the relationship between training in research methods courses and the self-reported use of research in the classroom, as well as opinions about research of 441 in-service teachers from two Midwestern states. Based on the study, the authors conclude that coursework in research methodology may lead to an increased use of research by teachers. In addition, in a survey of 510 special education teachers in three school districts in the U.S. context, Cooke, Test, Heward, Spooner, and Courson (1993) found a significant relationship between research methods courses and teachers' positive attitudes towards research and instructional analysis.

On the other hand, some studies have revealed that one introductory research methods course may not provide enough training for graduate students. For instance, based on a study conducted at two universities in the western United States, Young, Moore, Shaw, and Mundfrom (1997) found that graduate students whose only training in research is an introductory methods course are generally prepared to critique research studies, but may have difficulty in interpreting statistical analyses. More importantly, these students are not likely to be prepared to conduct original independent research. Similarly, Monahan (1994) surveyed 81 former students from a graduate research methods course in education at Rowan College in New Jersey and found that students who have completed the course found it useful in helping them to understand and evaluate research but were not generally motivated to take more courses in research and statistics, to learn more about research methods, or to engage in research.

Researchers have offered several pedagogical recommendations for teaching the research methods course. For instance, Brown and Rodgers (2002) maintain that graduate students, particularly those who are language teachers, should become involved in the research process itself; therefore, their textbook, *Doing Second Language Research*, aims at providing students with several activities that help them to design their own research and interpret their results and the results of other studies. Nunan (1992) also emphasized the importance of understanding and interpreting research, stating that language teachers and graduate students in linguistics should learn how to read studies critically and evaluate the reliability and validity of research outcomes effectively. For this reason, Nunan's (1992) textbook, *Research Methods in Language Learning*, aims to help research consumers develop critical analytical skills. Brown (1988; 1991) also emphasizes the need for language teachers to read and understand statistical studies and in his textbook, *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning*, he provides an approach to critiquing and evaluating statistical research. Brown's (1991) article, "Statistics as a foreign language - Part 1: What to look for in reading statistical language studies," which students read prior to our session on statistics, also provides strategies for use in understanding and critically evaluating statistical studies. Thus, teaching language instructors and graduate students how to critique research is an important goal of a research methods course. According to Brown (1991), readers who can critically assess research studies in the field will be able to use the findings and conclusions to improve their second language teaching.

Finally, Decorse (1997), in an ongoing assessment effort that collected data regarding progress and productivity of M.A. candidates in a new program at a small university in New York, concludes that research methods courses should promote critical thinking and problem-solving instead of only emphasizing statistical analyses.

In addition, Denham (2003) suggests that the course should be a meaningful learning experience rather than a short-term exercise in memorization, and finally, Sanders (2001) recommends that students be allowed to share their ideas in an ongoing manner, that their individual differences in experience and interest be taken into account, and that class assignments be frequent, small, varied, and linked to a final project.

## **The Study**

The purpose of this research was to investigate graduate students' experiences in a research methods course in an international context. More specifically, the study aimed at describing how graduate students majoring in language at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon are introduced to research methodology and at exploring how these students reflect on their experiences in the research methods course. As an assistant professor of English at AUB, I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in English language, including a graduate course in research methods. The main purpose of the course is to introduce graduate students to research methods in linguistic study. Topics include basic statistical and research concepts, the experimental method, correlation studies, survey research, ethnography, case studies, action research, and ethical considerations in research. Students are required to select and research a topic, and write a proposal for a linguistic research study, including research questions, rationale for the study, a brief literature review, and a proposed methodology and data analysis.

In general, I have found most students, especially first-year graduate students, enter this class uninformed and unaware of many major notions underlying research, including the basic differences among various research methods and the importance of adhering to ethical standards when conducting research. Therefore, it was interesting to investigate how students reacted to the course and reflected on their experiences in learning research methods. Thus, the aims of this study were two-fold: First, to describe how graduate students in language at AUB are introduced to research in English 301B by providing a detailed description of the course, including content, learning outcomes, and assignments. Secondly, the study also aimed at exploring how graduate students react to this research methods course: what aspects of the course they believe were beneficial or not beneficial, and how the course affected their views and practice of research.

## **Research Questions**

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How are graduate students in language at AUB introduced to research methods in linguistics?
2. Which aspects of the course helped students achieve the learning outcomes of the course?
3. Which aspects of the course were less successful at helping students achieve the learning outcomes of the course?
4. How did participating in the course affect students' views and practice of research?
5. Is there a difference in the views of first and second-year graduate students of

the course?

## **Context of the Study**

Before addressing the research questions listed above, it is necessary to provide some background information about AUB and the graduate program in English language. The university is a private, independent institution of higher learning, founded in 1866. AUB has six faculties and is co-educational; in addition, the language of instruction is English. AUB was accredited in June 2004 by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

The English department offers two undergraduate and two graduate degrees: The B.A. and M.A. in English language and the B.A. and M.A. in English literature. The requirements for an MA degree in English consist of 21 course credit hours and a thesis, along with any additional prerequisite courses determined by the department. Students working for an M.A. degree in English language must take the research methods course in addition to five graduate courses in linguistics, covering both applied and theoretical linguistic topics, such as sociolinguistics, language acquisition, and phonology; a course in statistics; and an additional graduate course from the Department of Education.

After completion of most of the course requirements, students must pass a comprehensive examination. In addition, typically during their second year of study, students are assigned to a thesis adviser, usually of the students' own choosing, who guides them in preparing and submitting a thesis proposal. As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the research methods course is to help students identify and research topics relative to their areas of interest and write a research proposal in preparation for their theses. The M.A. thesis should be based on independent, original research.

Thesis topics for graduate students in English language vary widely. Examples of recent thesis topics in the program include the syntax of non-native English negation, the relationship between foreign language anxiety and beliefs about language learning, and genre analysis of M.A. thesis introductions. Many of the students aim at continuing their studies abroad, typically in the USA, after graduating with an M.A. degree in English language.

## **A Detailed Description of the Course**

In order to address the first research question, this section describes how the students in this study are introduced to research by providing a detailed description of the learning outcomes, required textbooks, and assignments. (For a complete description of the course including grading criteria, schedule, and course policies, a copy of the class syllabus for Fall 2005-06 appears in [Appendix A](#).)

### **Learning Outcomes**

Five major objectives are listed on the course syllabus as learning outcomes. The first two originate from the major aims of the course, that is, introducing students to different types of research in linguistic study and helping them to identify and research topics relative to their area of interest in order to write a research proposal

in preparation for their theses:

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Distinguish between different types of research typically used in linguistic study and explain the advantages and limitations of each.
- Select and research a topic relevant to their area of interest and write a proposal for a linguistic research study, including research questions, rationale for the study, brief literature review, and proposed methodology and data analysis.

The remaining three objectives are my personal choice:

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify current issues and trends in linguistic research.
- Compile and document a bibliography on a topic of their choice in the broad areas of linguistics and second language learning.
- Abstract and critique research articles in linguistics and second language learning.

Regarding the remaining three objectives, I believe it is crucial that graduate students browse appropriate journals in the field and remain up-to-date with current issues and trends. In addition, I have often heard graduate students complain that documenting a bibliography and learning how to follow a citation format, such as the APA, is useless. Therefore, I wanted students to realize that compiling and documenting a working bibliography is a worthwhile skill that they will need to master as researchers. Finally, I believe that the first step to conducting research is understanding it. In my experience, many of these graduate students do not read and evaluate research articles properly; in other words, they cannot adequately summarize and critique research studies, and as mentioned earlier, it is crucial that graduate students and language teachers learn how to read research critically (Brown, 1988; 1991; Brown & Rodgers, 2002; Nunan, 1992). Therefore, a very important learning outcome for the course, in my opinion, is abstracting and critiquing research articles.

### **Required Textbooks**

The three required textbooks for the course are the following:

- Brown, J. D. (1988). *Understanding research in second language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, J. D., & Rodgers, T. S. (2002). *Doing second language research*. Oxford University Press.

The first two texts were chosen as required books for the class by colleagues who have taught the course previously. I kept them as required texts because they offer a comprehensive view of research in the field. The text I have added (Brown and Rodgers) is a more recent one that provides students with a reader- (and language

teacher-) friendly source with several activities that involve students in the research process. Since all of these students are also English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors, such a textbook that directly relates to their experiences will help them to bridge the gap between theory and practice, between conducting research and their own teaching.

### **Assignments**

There are five assignments in the course: A library assignment, bibliography assignment, oral presentation/discussion leader assignment, two reaction papers/critiques, and a research proposal.

#### **Library Assignment**

In order to identify current issues and trends in linguistic research, one of the learning outcomes for the course, the first assignment, due the third week of class, requires students to go to the university libraries: the main university library and the Center for English Language Research and Teaching (CELRT) library to browse current periodicals relevant to general linguistics and second language learning.

I provide students with a list of relevant journals, informing them that the list is not a comprehensive one, and asking them to browse at least three different journals. They are to choose one research article that they find interesting. They then submit a brief report that includes the following: 1) a summary of some current issues and trends in linguistic research in the journals they looked at, 2) a summary of one research article (not a review or theoretical article) including the purpose of the study, rationale, methodology (including analysis), findings, and conclusions, and 3) a copy of the article. Students also have the opportunity to present their reports in class orally.

#### **Bibliography Assignment**

A second learning outcome is to compile and document a bibliography on a topic of students' choice in linguistics and second language learning. This assignment requires that students prepare a bibliography with a minimum of thirty entries on a topic of their choice in APA style. Each student should have his or her bibliography proofread for style by a classmate before submitting it. Credit for the assignment is only awarded when a student and his/her proofreading partner have turned in a "perfect" bibliography. The bibliography may be turned in only three times [1]. In addition to the APA format, the assignment is also graded on the credibility and relevance of the sources chosen.

#### **Oral Presentation/Discussion Leader Assignment**

Each student takes primary responsibility for leading the discussion of one of the major topics, which correspond to the different types of

research typically done in linguistics. Discussion leaders should prepare an overview of the assigned readings and any related readings they select, lead a discussion of the topic, and prepare appropriate in-class activities. The lesson plan should include a variety of approaches: lecture (overview of the research methodology; its uses; its advantages as well as limitations), discussion, and small group activities (including critique of a sample research study). Discussion leaders go over their proposed session agenda with me at least one week before their scheduled presentation date to ensure that their lesson plan covers all necessary material and includes a variety of teaching approaches, including in-class activities. The topics presented by the seven students enrolled in the class in Fall 2005-06 were ethnography; survey research; correlation studies; case studies; action research; introspective methods and multi-site, multi-method, large-scale research; and discourse analysis/interaction research.

### **Reaction Papers/Critiques**

We practice hands-on critique of sample research articles in class throughout the course. In addition, each student turns in reaction papers of about 3-5 typed (double-spaced) pages each, abstracting and critiquing two research articles. The articles must report two different types of research and must be recent (published from 2000 to the present). Students often have the most difficulty with this assignment, and they are often surprised that their performance on the critiques is less than expected. Perhaps because of this, it is also an assignment that makes them realize that abstracting and analyzing a research study is a skill requiring training and practice.

### **Research Proposal**

This major assignment requires students to select and research a topic and write a proposal for a research study, including research questions, rationale for the study, a brief literature review, and a proposed methodology and data analysis. I recommend that students use the library, bibliography, and reaction paper assignments to select and review articles that will be useful in writing their research proposals. I also meet with students individually to discuss a first draft of their proposals two weeks before the assignment due date to ensure that the proposed topic and research method are feasible, to provide feedback and suggestions for revisions, and to answer any questions the students may have. The final draft of the proposal is due the last week of class, during which each student informally presents the topic to the class members for further feedback and discussion.

### **Students' Reactions to the Course**

In order to address the remaining four research questions related to the students' reactions to the course, semi-structured interviews were conducted in February 2006 with each of the seven graduate students who were registered during the Fall 2005

semester.

### Participants

Seven female graduate students majoring in English Language were enrolled Fall 2005. Table 1 presents basic background information about the students' ages, language teaching experience, languages spoken, degrees held, and status as a first or second-year graduate student in the program.[2] When asked if they attend teacher training workshops or academic conferences, the students stated that they do not usually do so; however, they also indicated that they would be interested in attending such events given the opportunity. The departments of English and Education at AUB offer regular teacher training, including EFL, workshops; local academic conferences, however, are less frequent, and students are not funded to attend international conferences.

**Table 1**

Participant	Age	Teaching Experience (years)	Native Language	First foreign language learned	Second foreign language learned	Degrees held	Student Status
Amy*	23	5	Arabic	English	French	B.A. in English language	Second-year
Dania	22	2	English	Arabic		B.A. in English language	First-year
Lina	35	1 1/2	Arabic/English	French		B.A. and M.A. in political science	First-year
Nadia	22	Just started this semester	Arabic	English	French	B.A. in biology; Teaching Diploma; Minor in English language	First-year
Rola	22	3	Arabic	English		B.A. in English language	Second-year
Sarah	22	1	French	Arabic	English	B.A. in English language; Teaching Diploma	First-year

\* Pseudonyms were assigned for all participants.

Finally, it is important to point out that, as shown in this table, four of these students are first-year graduate students registered for graduate courses in language for the first time, while the other three are second-year students who have already taken an average of four graduate courses in the field the previous year and who already had selected a thesis topic at the beginning of the semester. Moreover, second-year students already had to complete research papers for at least two required graduate courses in the program. Some examples of the topics chosen by students for these research papers, as revealed by the students in the interviews, are cross-cultural adaptability, the role of gender in compliment use, a survey of ethnolinguistic vitality, a survey of language attitudes and motivation of students learning Arabic as a foreign language, and a survey of attitudes towards code-switching in Lebanese Arabic songs.

Therefore, it was interesting to explore whether the graduate students with some research experience in the field would have reactions to a course introducing research methods different from those students who have had little or no such experience. Indeed, as the results section reveals, even though all students admitted to having benefited from a course focusing on research methodology, students from the two groups reacted differently to certain aspects of the course. In addition, all students commented on the benefits or the drawbacks of having both beginning and more advanced graduate students in the course.

### **Procedure**

Each of the seven graduate students who were registered during the fall 2005 semester were contacted and informed of the purpose of the study. All seven were willing to participate, so appointments were scheduled and semi-structured interviews with the students were conducted in February 2006. The interviews lasted from half an hour to approximately an hour. The first portion of the interviews was devoted to background items such as questions regarding students' age, languages spoken, language teaching experience, and prior experience with research. The major aim of the interviews was to investigate the students' reactions to the course; therefore, the second portion of the interviews consisted of questions concerning the students' views about the course content, readings, and assignments, in addition to questions regarding whether the course has changed the students' view of research, and if so, how; whether they have learned anything in the course that they consider valuable; how they chose the topics for their research proposals; whether they will be investigating the same topics in their theses. The questions used as prompts for the interviews appear in [Appendix B](#).

### **Analysis**

Interview data on the participants' backgrounds is summarized and presented in Table 1 under Participants. The interview data on students' reactions to the course was analyzed qualitatively by developing coding strategies and trying to identify concepts and categories in the data. The two initial coding categories developed were (a) students' opinions on various aspects of the course and (b) how the course changed students' views of research or their research practices. After these two

preliminary categories were established, the transcripts were examined again to identify more categories or subcategories. Finally, a set of codes was established, and the data were scrutinized and labeled. Each unit of data, often paragraphs but sometimes single sentences, was assigned one or more codes.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the data analysis revealed five major categories:

- A. Aspects of the course the students found beneficial;
- B. Aspects of the course the students would like to change;
- C. How the course changed students' views of research;
- D. How the course changed students' research practices; and
- E. Views of first vs. second-year graduate students.

The first four categories also include several subcategories.

### Aspects of the Course Students Found Beneficial

**General content.** As revealed by the following interview excerpts, the students generally commented that the course content was relevant, representative, and comprehensive, particularly the research methodologies covered and the ethical and practical considerations in research that were discussed. In addition, two first-year students stated that what they learned in this course helped them in writing papers for the other graduate course they were taking at the same time. Thus, the course content in general seemed successful in helping students achieve the learning outcomes for the course, particularly the objective stating that students should be able to distinguish between different types of research typically used in linguistic study and explain the advantages and limitations of each.

Amy: We covered a wide range of topics, which are all of relevance to our field; the course provided information about the different types of research that we will encounter... And so, it was really comprehensive!

Dania: Compared to [the research methods course in] literature, they just memorize citations and then forget them. In biology my roommate took a lot of exams and did a fake research paper, didn't actually collect data, didn't discuss ethical considerations, so this course seemed very representative . . .

Lina: [It was] just right for a methodology course, and compared to the one I took in my [former] M.A., I learned so much more in this one, it applies so much to the M.A. thesis or to any research paper, in that one we did a lot of statistics, and it wasn't very useful. It [this course] made me think of the methodologies, which I would rather be engaged in [than simply statistics]. Even for the papers in the writing course [the other graduate course the student was taking at the same time] I used what I learned in this course. It's exactly what a research methodology course should be. I learned so much more in this one than the old methods course I took.

Nadia: Everything [that the course covered] was relevant. It [the course] taught me how to think and how to write. It also helped me with the other graduate course I'm taking, in citations and in writing; It taught me citations, especially APA.

Sarah: The methods were very beneficial. The ethical considerations and sample consent forms were very helpful, I didn't know about this; the practical research tips were very useful too.

**Readings.** The students generally found the required textbooks and supplementary readings very helpful; more specifically, they found the required textbooks representative of the course content, comprehensive, and reader-friendly, and students emphasized that one of the required textbooks, *Doing Second Language Research* (Brown and Rodgers), was especially useful, as shown in the following excerpts.

Dania: The readings explained the subjects really well, and they were representative of the methodologies . . . Brown and Rodgers was very useful, clear, lots of examples, explained well.

Nadia: The readings were enough, you can get all the necessary information from them

Lina: Brown and Rodgers was very helpful, with activities we can use. I used it a lot for my presentation.

Moreover, some students commented that they found the supplementary articles very beneficial.

Amy: [The supplementary articles are] a great hands-on way of applying what we were learning.

Nadia: The supplementary readings were very helpful, I'm keeping them in a file and keeping them as a reference for later on, for future courses.

Finally, one student, Rola, mentioned that perhaps "there was too much" reading, but added "I understand why you included all of them, each would have something different and we are graduate students so it's important to have different sources."

**Assignments.** The students typically found all five assignments beneficial, but in varying degrees and for different reasons. According to Sanders (2001), small and frequent class assignments that are linked to a final project may reduce student anxiety in the research methods course, so it is not surprising that students generally found the assignments helpful. The few suggestions the students made for changes regarding the assignments are discussed under "Aspects of the course students would like to change" below.

Regarding the oral presentation assignment, students were unanimous in agreeing that preparing for the presentations and participating in the discussions kept the

class sessions interesting and helped them to understand the concepts well. Thus, the oral presentation assignment also helped students achieve the learning outcome stating that students will be able to distinguish between different types of research typically used in linguistic study and explain the advantages and limitations of each. The students also pointed out that the presentations were beneficial because they themselves were motivated and worked hard in preparing them.

Amy: I must admit that some [oral presentation] topics were more difficult to tackle and present than others. However, I think that the class really did their best in making the material more interesting . . . And I believe that engaging myself in the presentations and participating in the discussions helped me grasp concepts that I went over very quickly while reading.

Lina: My presentation helped me a lot, I liked the topic, case studies, and I used the info for the writing class [the other graduate course the student was taking at the same time]. The presentations are the most important aspect of the course, because you do the most work, it's the best form of learning . . . The booklets [provided by the students] were helpful in taking the information there in one stack, and I thought of the COMPS [M.A. qualifying exams] . . . I would've liked two presentations, because now I fully understand case studies, and this is how I really understand, by presenting the material to the class.

Yara: It [the student's own presentation] was interesting, although I'm not working on ethnography. It makes you go more into the area, you start looking at things outside the course books. For example I had to hunt for a good sample article on ethnography, which was a good experience, I chose one in a sociolinguistics setting but also looked at a book by Van Lier, about ethnography and teaching.

As for the bibliography assignment, six out of the seven students stated that they liked it while one "hated" it, but, more importantly, all students agreed that it was very useful. This assignment was successful in helping students achieve the learning outcome stating that students should be able to compile and document a bibliography on a topic of their choice in the broad areas of linguistics and second language learning.

Amy: With regard to the bibliography, look at my final project. You could easily see that there was a huge difference in the reference sections of my first and second drafts. That was something invaluable that the course taught me . . . I know I could always get the APA and work on the references, but honestly speaking, I wouldn't have paid much attention to it, because I didn't realize that it's something that needs such meticulous effort, and three trials! I'm proud of myself for getting it right from the second try!

Dania: It [the bibliography assignment] was very useful but I hated it! So technical, little details, tedious. I remember them now and that's useful and I know for publishing they're important, and you kind of drove home how important it is to follow the format.

Lina: I liked it, it sunk in! The fact that we had to go over it again and again, I believe in rewriting. And it helped me with starting a bibliography and a lot of it I used immediately, for the other course, because I also chose writing, we had to do an annotated bibliography there.

Yara: It was one of the best [assignments] because you go over it more than once and you develop an understanding for a bibliography, and peer editing was the most important part. I did a much better job than in other courses requiring bibliography.

The research proposal, not surprisingly, had different uses for the two groups, first-year and more advanced students. While it gave the first-year students an opportunity to explore suitable thesis topics and a chance to practice writing a thesis proposal, it served the more advanced students by providing them with an opportunity to either write or revise and receive feedback on their thesis proposals. In both cases, it helped students achieve the learning outcome stating that students should select and research a topic relevant to their area of interest and write a proposal for a linguistic research study.

Dania: I'm really really glad that we did it. I feel that it will help me for later on, when I have to do a proper proposal.

Nadia: It [the proposal] was very helpful, it prepared us for the thesis proposal and it helped me in preparing the research project for the other course. It helped me to know how to write about participants, method, ethical issues. I'm doing the work not critiquing it.

Yara: It [the research proposal assignment]'s also a good jumpstart, you're telling students that they should find a topic for their thesis and our program is a thesis-oriented program.

Amy: The course provides us with a great opportunity to work on something so relevant to us, in the very near future. We all have to write proposals for our theses, and this course paved the way for us to do that. Given that my assignment was modified, yet still focused on the proposal aspect of it, I believe that I had a different take on it . . . I mean I had a chance to revise an already existing proposal and make it better, which was very useful.

Rola: I used it for my thesis. I took it as an opportunity to write the proposal, and since you are my research methods course instructor, your comments would be on the method, on the way it was written, so that was very important for me.

In addition, although some students stated they did not "do so well" in the critique assignments, they still found writing critiques very useful in stimulating critical thinking and teaching them how to critique and analyze research articles, one of the stated learning outcomes for the course.

Amy: I also think that they [the critiques] were very important, because the critiques that we do in other courses are not exactly the same as these; who would have thought that one could critique an abstract? So, that was also

new to us. But, the most important thing about the critique assignment is that we critiqued the methodology, which was something that we didn't know anything about. So, it was really about learning about the methodology and then assessing whether it was appropriate or not. And I think that we have become better readers because of this; we not only know what the researchers were talking about, before, I used to skip reading most of the tables, charts, and statistics, but also we can read, understand, and evaluate all these things, which is great!

- Dania: The first [critique assignment] was difficult because you feel arrogant saying what's wrong with someone else's research, but it was really really useful in understanding articles and made me read a lot of articles which is good at this stage. It was an excuse to read more. The second was easier because I've done an earlier one but I did worse on it because I thought I knew what I was doing. Maybe I did become arrogant!
- Lina: Good practice in analyzing studies. I didn't do such a good job, but you made me realize that "they have to give you this", so the difference between the basics, what's expected and what's extra, the strengths. And I'm glad you made us choose two different methodologies.
- Yara: They may help us in many ways, stimulate critical thinking, you have to read very carefully. And they help us to develop critical reading that you need at the graduate level.

Not surprisingly, the library assignment was very popular among the first-year students, and even two of the three advanced students stated that they benefited from exploring new journals, looking for current issues and trends in linguistic research, which is one of the stated course learning outcomes. Nevertheless, they also pointed out that the assignment was more helpful for first-year students. The advanced students' suggestion for reconsidering this assignment for second-year students is discussed below under "Aspects of the course students would like to change."

- Lina: Browsing, it made me become familiar with the website, searching, and what journals are available. Summarizing was also a good practice.
- Rola: For a student taking it [the assignment] for the first time, it helps. It familiarizes them with journals, topics in each journal. But for me, it was an opportunity to browse for current issues, which is always helpful but the assignment was definitely more helpful for first-year students.
- Yara: It was a jumpstart on everything. It's a very good way for people who are not familiar with scholarly journals. Reading and browsing, exploring new journals. I found out about TESL Reporter; I didn't know about it earlier.

**Structure of the course.** Finally, two first-year students commented that the course was structured in such a way that the first four assignments all helped in preparing the final one, the research proposal. As mentioned earlier, smaller assignments that are linked to the final project may promote student learning and lower anxiety (Sanders, 2001); therefore, these students, not surprisingly, appreciated the chance to work on several smaller tasks that helped in preparing the

final research proposal. Moreover, one of the students stated that the structure and focus of the course helped them to know what is expected of them in every session, which was helpful since they were taking graduate courses for the first time and so the course served as a "nice bridge" between undergraduate and graduate study.

Sarah: Like all your courses, [the assignments were] progressive, which really helps. All the assignments helped for the proposal.

Dania: Everything we did before that really helped with the proposal, even the critiques because they helped us to see how things are supposed to be structured . . . Thank God for your syllabus, it was so detailed! Even when we couldn't meet you, I could refer to the syllabus. The course was very structured which was very helpful . . . It [the course] was a nice bridge between undergrad and graduate, because it was still structured and focused, I knew what I was doing and I knew where I was going, we knew what readings we had every session, I can't stress how much help the structure was, but more was expected of us. Still someone holding our hand but we're no longer spoon-fed.

### **Aspects of the Course Students Would Like to Change**

**Session on statistics.** While only two students, Rola and Sarah, indicated that they would have liked more statistics in the course, the remaining students stated that the statistics session was either too hasty or irrelevant.

Nadia: The statistical analyses, MANOVA . . . I felt that they're a little irrelevant to the course . . . I can look at them on my own or maybe take a statistics course before taking this one... [I found] statistics [least beneficial] especially because it was done in one session.

Sarah: Basis statistics was very hasty. I would've liked a little bit more of statistics . . . Statistics was confusing, maybe if I was taking the 227 course [a required undergraduate introductory course in statistics] at the same time it would have helped. Maybe we can simplify the statistics session, there were too many concepts all at once.

Lina: The chapter on statistics [was least beneficial]: Diekhoff [one of the supplementary readings on statistics] was helpful, but statistics in general are over my head.

These reactions towards statistics are not uncommon. As Brown (1991) states, second language teachers often avoid statistical studies or simply jump to read the conclusions rather than critically evaluate the studies themselves. Decorse (1997), in a study of the progress and productivity of graduate students in the U.S. context, found that students revealed a lack of confidence and helplessness when it came to quantitative research and statistics and therefore suggests that the research methods course de-emphasizes statistics while focusing on critical thinking and problem solving. In addition, Trimarco (1997) recommends that instructors build students' confidence in quantitative research and statistics. Although this course is not one in

statistical analysis, a session reviewing basic statistical concepts is necessary for students to understand basic notions underlying quantitative research. This statistics session needs to be rethought in order to make it as beneficial as possible for the students.

**Choice of sample research articles.** Two students stated that they would like a larger variety of sample research articles, more specifically, fewer applied linguistics and language learning and teaching related articles and more articles on sociolinguistics or theoretical linguistics.

Yara: We would like to have more sociolinguistics or theoretical linguistics, and this applies to the program itself, it's oriented towards TEFL and applied linguistics. Of course professors can't present everything in the field, and graduate students are supposed to read on their own too.

Dania: A lot was about language learning and language teaching, I would like to see more linguistics and less just applied linguistics.

In order to ensure all students' needs are met, it would be worthwhile to explore the students' interests at the beginning of each semester and to choose as many sample research articles relevant to these interests as possible.

**Readings.** As mentioned earlier, the students generally found the required textbooks and supplementary readings extremely beneficial. One student, however, recommended the addition of a textbook on surveys in second language research.

Yara: I recommend that you add one book by Dornyei on questionnaires and surveys in second language research because it helps and most of us would like to work on questionnaires. So this would help us in the thesis. I got it to help me understand how to pilot a questionnaire and so on.

In addition, even though the APA Manual was often referred to and used in class, it was not listed on the syllabus; therefore, one student, Lina, suggested that it be added to the list of recommended textbooks.

**Assignments.** The suggestions the students made regarding the assignments were as follows: reconsider the library assignment (for second-year students), modify the guidelines for the oral presentation assignment, add sample proposals to the supplementary readings, and change the grading criteria for the proposal and library assignments.

As mentioned earlier, even though students found the library assignment somewhat useful, second-year students pointed out that it was somewhat irrelevant to their needs since they have already acquired relevant library skills.

Amy: I believe that we could have done without the library assignment, because it's something that we learn to do since the first semester. But for first semester graduates, this would help them a lot! Given that this was my last semester,

I felt that it was not very helpful to me...

In addition, two students suggested that the guidelines for the oral presentation assignment be modified in order to ensure an adequate amount of time to complete the sample critique activity during each session.

- Rola: The theoretical aspects were explained very well in the presentations, but when it came to practice, we didn't have enough time to critique at the end [of each presentation]. We should've spent more time on that . . . maybe a guideline for half content and half critiquing or analysis of sample article would be better, or using sample articles as part of the activities. In my presentation, showing the paper was very important for giving a live example. So maybe activities should be oriented towards the research article.
- Lina: There wasn't enough time [for the sample critique in each presentation], it was too general and too quick. I didn't have a chance to grasp the sample critique activities and that could've helped more in our critiques.

Three of the four first-year students stated that they would have liked to see sample proposals to help them in preparing the research proposal assignment. One advanced student suggested that a mini pilot study be added to the proposal assignment so that students would have an opportunity to find out their weaknesses in "technical issues" and statistics.

- Lina: Looking at sample proposals would've helped, to see the layout/format.
- Nadia: Having sample proposals would've been helpful. I took a form from an advanced graduate student doing her thesis.
- Rola: Maybe if we can add a mini pilot study to the proposal, they have to deal with the technicalities, so students would have more questions about technical issues, including statistics.

Finally, two of the first-year students, Lina and Nadia, recommended that the grading criteria for the assignments be modified somewhat. More specifically, the two students believed that 30% was "too much" for the proposal, and one of them also felt that 5% was "too little" for the library assignment.

Obviously, the above recommendations and suggestions regarding the course assignments should be taken into consideration the next time the course is taught.

### **How the Course Changed Students' Views of Research**

The interviews revealed that the course changed students' views of research; more specifically, the students believed that the course provided them with new information on research, clarified the research process, and reassured them that research is "doable."

**Providing new information on research.** For the first-year students with minimal or no prior experience with research, one expected finding was that the course would provide them with new information on the research process, particularly information on the different research methodologies used in linguistics and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Indeed, the students revealed that in addition to acquiring totally new information on research, some of their prior beliefs about research were also modified as a result of the course, as shown in the following excerpts.

Dania: I had no idea that correlation existed! I didn't know the logic behind them. Statistics were completely new to me as well, and the idea that they can be applied to real life.

Sarah: I also thought research was either experimental or ethnography. I didn't know about triangulation . . . And I thought good research has to do with numbers . . . Ethical considerations and consent forms were completely new to me.

**Clarifying the research process.** Moreover, the course seemed to clarify the research process for both first and second-year students. Specifically, students revealed that the course helped them to understand how research is structured and familiarized them with practical and ethical considerations in research. Lina: It [the course] made research more as compartments and I choose where to go, ok, survey, experimental. It made research clearer, more structured.

Yara: Sometimes it [the course] made me think that research is a big burden, when you have to take many considerations like ethical considerations and practical considerations, finding people, getting permission, or in an experiment you're burdened with so many obstacles. So it's finding the easiest way out, in a practical sense, like choosing a survey I mean. But later on I'd like to do something with experimental research, maybe ethnography too. It didn't discourage me from doing research, but it made me think of very practical considerations I didn't think about before . . . [The course helped me to learn] how to plan the research, step-by-step, before starting the research, and still being flexible . . . planning research, ethical and practical considerations [were very beneficial].

Rola: Before, I didn't know why I needed to use ANOVA or MANOVA, so 301 was very helpful for that. It cleared things up a bit more, knowing exactly what an ANOVA is for example.

**Reassuring students that research is "doable."** One unexpected way the course influenced students' views of research was reassuring them that research is "doable," as one of the first-year students put it.

Dania: I know it [research]'s doable now! Mere mortals can do this! You read these articles and you think "wow" and you think you're useless, I still know it's hard but it's doable . . . I'm so glad I took it [the course] in my first term. It put me on the track to thinking about the thesis and research in

general. It was really nice to come in and discuss research as something that we're going to be part of, it was very reassuring and the environment was so supportive and it made me feel like I'm in a graduate program.

## **How the Course Changed Students' Research Practices**

The interviews also revealed that the course changed students' research practices in several ways. Specifically, the students pointed out that the course encouraged them to browse and read the literature, trained them to analyze and critique research articles, motivated them to join professional organizations, and helped first-year students explore suitable thesis topics.

**Encouraging students to browse and read research articles and scholarly books.** As revealed in the interviews, the course encouraged students, especially but not exclusively first-year students, to browse and read research articles and scholarly books in the field. Thus students achieved the learning outcome stating that they should be able to identify current issues and trends in linguistic research, since the best way to do so is to remain-up-to-date by consistently reading and browsing research articles. One advanced student declared that the course increased her reading of scholarly articles because it made her "re-read the material she had previously read" in order to analyze it more fully. In addition, three of the four first-year students stated that their reading of scholarly articles increased because of the course, as shown in the following excerpts from the interviews.

Dania: The course made me start looking at articles; I didn't need to do that for sociolinguistics because we had the books.

Nadia: I didn't use to read scholarly books and once I looked at a book you recommended on the syllabus and I saw a chapter that you've copied for us and I saw that it's a good practice [to look at extra readings, not just ones required for the courses], now I go to Jafet [the main university library] and browse books in the field. I've used some books for the sociolinguistics paper [for the other graduate course], on language and gender, I'm done with the paper but I'm keeping the books to look at more and read them; with me now I have a recent article from Journal of Pragmatics because I found it interesting.

Lina: It [the course] made me curious about case studies, so I started browsing for case studies, and now I'm thinking of doing that in my thesis.

**Training students to analyze and critique research articles.** One essential research skill that the course trained both first-year and more advanced students in was analysis and critical reading of research articles. While only one first-year student stated that the course changed the way she read articles, the more advanced students seemed more aware of this need for critical reading that was lacking in their prior training, as revealed by the following excerpts from interviews with the three students.

Amy: I think that it [the course] gives you the basic skills that you need throughout

**Motivating students to join professional organizations.** As revealed by one of the first-year students, another way that the course influenced students' research practices was encouraging them to join professional organizations in their field.

Lina: You told us about TESOL and I was browsing the TESOL Website, I also tried to find out about others [other organizations] worth joining, so the course made me start thinking of being a member of professional organizations and getting to know researchers in the same field.

**Helping first-year students explore suitable thesis topics.** Finally, the course gave first-year students an opportunity to explore suitable thesis topics and to practice writing a research proposal. The students revealed different processes that they went through as they brainstormed for a suitable topic, as shown by the following excerpts.

Dania: [I had to do] lots and lots of reading. I started out with something practical and simple, but then, wait, this is so interesting, I was reading the article for fun. I've worked with special needs children extensively, so I kind of realized that I could do something useful in this area. I never thought of doing this, this topic, as a thesis, it was something I did because I loved it. I really hope so [to pursue this topic for my thesis].

Lina: I started from my interest in writing and my interest in case studies and in children. Yes [I will pursue this topic for my thesis], so far, but I won't do a case study of one child, but a case study of a school, a comparative case study.

Nadia: First I thought of language and politics, but I didn't find any books so I changed the topic. The second topic was one of the topics that were recommended for us in the sociolinguistics course, and I once used a book by Robin Lakoff for an undergraduate assignment for one of your courses. Also you feel that it's a daily life issue. I found that other topics were not related to our daily life.

Sarah: It was within my area of interest, policy and planning, and the context, are we a Francophone country or not? I took two weeks to come up with the topic! Yes, I think I will [pursue this topic for my thesis].

**Views of First vs. Second-year Graduate Students** All seven students commented on the fact that both first and second-year students were enrolled in the course, and most of these comments were negative. Interestingly, as revealed by the following excerpts, the more advanced students generally believe that it is better for graduate students to register for such a course during their first year, for a variety of reasons, but mainly because it would prepare them for the rest of their graduate courses. On the other hand, the only reason it might not be beneficial to take the course in the first year, as stated by one of the advanced students, is that "newcomers may change their mind about the topic" for the research proposal, "when they take

more courses," and so they might not be using the same proposal for their theses, but the same student added that they would at least have the opportunity to practice writing a proposal.

- Yara: I should have taken this course a long time ago [to help me prepare my thesis proposal], and the proposal defied the purpose for me because I already had a thesis proposal [but] I extended the bibliography, found more sources . . . It wasn't bad to have a mix, students who were newcomers did their best to cope with other students, they asked how we should do stuff, and the level of communication between students was very good, but I don't know how it would function next year. I can't generalize if this experience will work next year . . . And it would have helped to take this course before the other courses, it would have helped for the other courses.
- Rola: I strongly believe that the class should be taken by first-year students. Then in other courses you can set high standards: citations, critiques, analysis, because they've already taken [the course] and they're supposed to know these things. It would be much more beneficial for later on.
- Amy: I believe that this course should be taken by first semester students, and this is what I among many other graduates advised the new students to do. One disadvantage that newcomers might face is that their proposal for the course may not be the one they will use for their thesis. However, they will at least know how to write a proposal! When I wrote the proposal, I had no idea how to do it, and it was after I had submitted it to my advisor that he told me I had to write an abstract, and not 10 pages, that I had to include all the research questions, instead of glossing over the main areas I wished to research, and that there's a special form that we need to fill out, and so forth. So, the . . . proposal exercise is a great first step to writing the final proposal!

Moreover, only one of the first-year students stated that it was beneficial to have both beginner and more advanced students in the course, mentioning how helpful it was to have a mentoring relationship with peers, in line with Connors and Franklin (1999), who argue that female graduate students may derive many benefits from relationships with peers. On the other hand, the remaining three first-year students unexpectedly expressed a sense of unfairness and intimidation at having more advanced students in class, feelings obviously worth taking into consideration when teaching a course with students with different levels of experience.

- Dania: Because we had different levels, first and second-year students, in class it helped. Some students mentored the others. I asked about format, do we have to write predicted conclusions and so on . . . We have a tiny supportive department so I really liked the idea that we had students who were more advanced. It's been so wonderful. For example the presentation on discourse analysis was by an advanced student, and another beginner student was working on a presentation for another course on the same topic, and she poured the information to her. They're explaining stuff to us and reviewing it at the same time.

- Sarah: Because we had both newcomers and second-year students, it was, I don't know, they've discussed it [the thesis proposal] with their advisers already so it wasn't fair for first-year students to work on the proposal and be assessed the same way as more advanced students . . . I think the course should be targeted towards first- year students.
- Lina: Having the more advanced students was intimidating and wasn't that helpful! You'd ask a question and they would immediately answer, like it was a given.
- Nadia: Maybe even unconsciously you were comparing first and second-year students. It was frustrating because others in class knew so much and kept saying more. Even when participating, I was afraid what I was saying wasn't important and when writing, that it won't be good.

Finally, one second-year student stated that the course could be given to only advanced students, provided some modifications are made.

- Rola: If only advanced students take the course, it has to be given differently, not everything would be new, content-wise, but still all methods are important to cover [even if students have already decided on a method for their thesis], but we need more practice in analysis, and using anything to help in preparing for the thesis, since it would be right before the thesis.

## **Conclusion**

This study first aimed at describing how graduate students in language at AUB are introduced to research in one course by providing a detailed description of the course. Its second aim was to explore how these students react to and reflect on their experience in the research methods course. One possible limitation to this study is the fact that the instructor of the course is also the researcher who collected and analyzed data related to former students' reactions. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this study was not to evaluate the course but rather to describe it and explore students' experiences and reactions to it.

The following conclusions can be made based on the findings of this study. First, the seven graduate students who took the course in Fall 2005 generally revealed positive reactions in terms of the aspects of the course they have found beneficial as well as ways in which the course has positively changed their views of research or their research practices. First-year students stated that the course reassured them that research is "doable," motivated them to join professional organizations, and helped them to explore suitable thesis topics. Moreover, the students stated that the course helped them to understand how research is structured and familiarized them with practical and ethical considerations in research. In addition, similar to the majority of graduate students in Monahan's (1994) survey set in the U.S.A. context, these students found the research methods course useful in helping them to evaluate and critique research and in encouraging them to read professional journals more often and more critically. The interviews also revealed that the students generally found all five class assignments beneficial, in line with Sanders' (2001) suggestion that small

and frequent class assignments that are linked to the final project may promote student learning and reduce student anxiety in the research methods course.

More specifically, the oral presentation assignment, in addition to the course content, was successful in helping students achieve the learning outcome stating that they should be able to distinguish between different types of research typically used in linguistic study and explain the advantages and limitations of each. The bibliography assignment helped students achieve the learning outcome stating that students should be able to compile and document a bibliography on a topic of their choice in the broad areas of linguistics and second language learning, and the proposal assignment allowed students to research a topic relevant to their area of interest and write a proposal for a linguistic research study, another major learning objective of the course. In addition, the critique and library assignments in addition to the class readings were effective in helping students achieve the two objectives of critically reading and evaluating research and identifying current issues and trends in linguistic research. Since they aim at helping readers critically read and evaluate research, the three required textbooks, which constitute the major readings for the course, also helped students achieve the learning objective of learning to critique research.

Nevertheless, some aspects of the course were not as successful in helping students achieve the learning objectives of the course. For instance, some students expressed negative reactions towards the statistics session, in line with the graduate students in Decorse's (1997) study, who expressed a lack of confidence and even helplessness when it came to quantitative research and statistics. Moreover, in opposition to Connors and Franklin (1999), who explored the experiences of six female graduate students who participated in a qualitative research methods course in the United States and concluded that female graduate students may derive many benefits from relationships with peers, only one first-year student stated that it was beneficial to have both beginner and more advanced students in the course while the remaining three unexpectedly expressed a sense of unfairness and intimidation at having more advanced students in class.

Based on the findings, the following specific pedagogical recommendations regarding can be made for this course. First, although the course's focus is not statistical analysis, a session reviewing basic statistical concepts is necessary for students to understand notions underlying quantitative research; therefore, the statistics session needs to be rethought in order to make it as beneficial as possible for the students. Secondly, in order to ensure all students' needs are met, it is important to explore the students' interests at the beginning of each semester and to choose as many sample research articles relevant to these interests as possible. Third, the few suggestions made by these students regarding the course assignments should be taken into consideration the next time the course is taught. Finally, the issue of whether only first-year, advanced, or both types of students register for this course needs to be further discussed, in light of both students' experiences and views as well as the department's needs and goals. As a preliminary recommendation, it seems advisable that incoming graduate students take the course in their first year in order to be better prepared for their remaining courses and their theses.

## **Note**

[1] Students are often amused when I mention the "three times only" requirement,

but later realize that it is very rare to get the format right from the first or even the second time.

[2] It is worth mentioning that the student who does not hold a B.A. in English language and has not minored in it, Lina, has taken several required undergraduate courses in English language before beginning graduate study in the program.

### **About the Author**

Rula L. Diab is Assistant Professor of English at the American University of Beirut. Her research interests include individual differences in second language acquisition, socio-cultural factors in foreign language education, and second language writing. Her recent research has appeared in *System*, *TESL Canada Journal*, *TESL Reporter*, and *English Teaching Forum*.

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## Appendices

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## **Appendix A: Course Syllabus**

### **Course Content and Learning Outcomes**

The main purpose of this course is to introduce students to bibliography and research methods in linguistic study. Topics include basic statistical and research concepts, the experimental method, correlation studies, survey research, ethnography, case studies, classroom observation and research, ethical considerations in research, and recent advances in computer technology in the field of bibliography and research. Students will be assisted in identifying and researching topics relative to their area of interest in order to write a research proposal in preparation for their theses.

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- identify current issues and trends in linguistic research.
- compile and document a bibliography on a topic of their choice in the broad areas of linguistics and second language learning.
- distinguish between different types of research typically used in linguistic study and explain the advantages and limitations of each.
- abstract and critique research articles in linguistics and second language learning.
- select and research a topic relevant to their area of interest and write a proposal for a linguistic research study, including research questions, rationale for the study, brief literature review, and proposed methodology and data analysis.

### **Resources Available to Students**

#### ***Required Textbooks***

Brown, J. D. (1988). *Understanding research in second language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Brown, J. D., & Rodgers, T. S. (2002). *Doing second language research*. Oxford University Press.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

#### ***Recommended Textbooks***

Johnson, D. (1992). *Approaches to research in second language learning*. New York: Longman.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Swales, J. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge University Press.

Porte, G. (2002). *Appraising research in second language learning: A practical approach to critical analysis of quantitative research*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

## **Appendix B: Prompts for the Interviews**

**Part I: Background Information**

- 1) Age:
- 2) Nationality:
- 3) Language Teaching Experience (in years)
- 4) Language Background: (First/Native Language; 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Language; 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Language; Other Languages)
- 5) Degrees Held: (B.A. in \_\_\_\_\_; Teaching Diploma in \_\_\_\_\_; Other: \_\_\_\_\_)
- 6) Graduate courses in your field you have already taken:
- 7) Research projects/papers you have already undertaken or written:
- 8) Do you usually attend research-related academic conferences in your field?  
Yes / No  
  
If so, approximately how many per academic year? \_\_\_\_\_  
Approximately how many over the past 5 years? \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) Courses you are teaching this semester: \_\_\_\_\_
- 10) Do you usually attend teacher training workshops? Yes / No  
  
If so, approximately how many per academic year? \_\_\_\_\_  
Approximately how many over the past 5 years? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part II: Students' Reactions to the Course**

1. What is your opinion of the course content? Do you think it was representative, adequate, lacking...etc.? Is there any topic that you would have liked to be discussed but wasn't? Is there any topic that was discussed that you felt was unnecessary or irrelevant?
2. What is your opinion of the course readings/textbooks?
3. What is your opinion of each of the course assignments?