

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2010– 2011

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION*Subject area and awards being examined:*

School of:	Modern Languages and Cultures	Subject(s):	Dept of Linguistics and Phonetics
Programme(s) / Module(s):	awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.)		
MA in Linguistics	MA		
MA in Linguistics and English Language Teaching	MA		
MA in Phonetics	MA		

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than 6 weeks after the relevant meeting of the Board of Examiners, to exexadmin@leeds.ac.uk.

Alternatively you can post your report to:

**Head of Academic Quality and Standards,
Academic Quality and Standards Team,
Room 12:81, EC Stoner Building,
The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT**

PART B: COMMENTS FOR THE INSTITUTION ON THE EXAMINATION PROCESS AND STANDARDS***Matters for Urgent Attention***

None.

Only applicable in first year of appointment

Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?

I did not receive previous reports. However, I was provided with very full minutes of the degree classification board meeting of the previous year, at which the external examiner had commented in some detail on many issues. The School responses were discussed with me.

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School.

N/A

1. Please indicate the extent to which the programme aims and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were commensurate with the level of the award?

- *The appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes for the programme(s)/modules and of the structure and content of the programme(s);*
- *The extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration.*

The ILOs look entirely appropriate for an MA. The programme is well structured, with each of the three MA programmes having a different mix of compulsory and optional modules, leading to depth and real specialisation for each MA while at the same time ensuring the entire programme is coherent and manageable.

2. Did the aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?

- *The comparability of the programme(s) with similar programme(s) at other institutions and against national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.*

The programme can certainly hold its own when compared with MAs in this field in other institutions. It addresses the general problem of wide diversity of incoming students by having several compulsory modules that start with fundamentals (but consider them at a PG level of intellectual abstraction) and then move forward at a brisk pace. Other modules offer students the opportunity to specialise in specific topics.

3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs?

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

Assessment was well designed -- most modules had a mix of methods, requiring students to develop and show competence in, for example, practical problem analysis, data collection, dealing with theoretical literature and discursive reasoning. Arrangements for marking looked efficient and generally students were given generous feedback on content, method and quality of the writing in their work. In several cases, it was possible to see real student improvement through a set of assignments on a specific module and from the 1st semester to the 2nd. A short informal get-together with some of the students in June 2011 confirmed that they very much appreciated the guidance they were given through feedback on their assignments. For many of the modules, I was also sent the student feedback forms and these indicated a generally high level of contentment with the teaching provided.

4. Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the aims and ILOs?

- *The academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort.*

Student performance overall was satisfactory and very similar to students on other MAs in the field of linguistics. As is nearly invariably the case on such MAs, students in this Leeds MA cohort varied rather widely in prior knowledge and levels of talent. However, nearly all were brought up to the appropriate level of knowledge and competence. For students that struggled initially, there was clear evidence of targeted and successful help being given by the lecturers/supervisors. In the dissertations, some students showed impressive levels of academic competence; others produced workmanlike pieces of work; a few had somewhat troubled journeys -- sometimes due to their failure to keep up communication with their supervisor over the summer period.

5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum

N/A

6. The nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year

It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.

Since this was my first year, I cannot make comparisons with earlier practice.

7. The influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching

This may include examples of curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research.

The content of the teaching on all modules is clearly influenced by current research in the subject. Students are familiarised with research methods both in the subject-specific modules and in an excellent Research Methods module, which provides them with a good understanding of the nature of linguistic research and prepares them for the independent project that they have to undertake for their MA dissertation.

The Examination Process**8. The University and its Schools provide guidance for External Examiners as to their roles, powers and responsibilities. Please indicate whether this material was sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?**

- *Whether external examiners have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and whether they are encouraged to request additional information.*

The material received was clear and sufficient. Any additional information I asked for was in all cases provided promptly.

9. Did you receive appropriate documentation relating to the programmes and/or parts of programmes for which you have responsibility, e.g. programme specifications or module handbooks?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

I received appropriate documentation for the overall programme and also for nearly all individual modules, though levels of detail varied somewhat for these. I have asked for full materials for all modules and ways are currently being sought of giving me access to the VLE materials for all modules.

10. Was sufficient assessed/examination work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?

I received all assessed material for all modules, so am confident in my evaluation of standards.

11. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners?

Administrative arrangements were entirely satisfactory. The office staff, <<>> and <<>>, did an excellent job in sending me material in timely fashion, giving advance notice of shipments and providing me with all information needed. The BoE operated in orderly and well-regulated fashion. It did become clear at the October meeting that there are no detailed rules for the degree classification of borderline candidates. In the relevant case, a sensible and (in my view) entirely justifiable decision was taken, but the absence of explicit rules creates a danger that there may not be full equity from one cohort to the next.

12. Were appropriate procedures in place to give due consideration to mitigating circumstances and medical evidence?

Mitigating and medical circumstances were considered in an appropriate manner. It was also clear that the relevant students had been given support during the year. Discussion of the circumstances of one named student had found their way into the draft minutes of the June meeting but it was agreed at the October BoE that this was not best practice.

For Examiners involved in Mentoring Arrangements

If you have acted as a mentor to a new external examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements.

Other Comments

Please use this box if you wish to make any further comments not covered elsewhere on the form.

I append here the more detailed comments that I provided on the assessed material of all the modules and on the dissertations.

Comments on semester 1 and semester 2 work

Overall

I was pleased to see evidence of a great deal of high-quality teaching and learning in the material that I was sent. Students are offered a wide variety of designated MA modules, with a sensible pathway depending on the specific MA they are doing. The student feedback that I received (the forms were not included for each module) showed that students appreciated the learning experience.

Forms of assessment for each module looked entirely appropriate to me. It was also good to see that, where suitable, a practical component was included. Assessment was largely split up into at least two assignments, with the first one providing a good opportunity for formative feedback to the student, both on issues of content and form.

Marking looked consistent and fair, with roughly similar marks being awarded for pieces of roughly similar merit also across modules. I also very helpfully received (part of) any 1st-2nd marker dialogue that had taken place, in the form of comments on the marksheets or prints of emails. These exchanges suggest that adequate 2nd-marking is taking place. I am happy to agree all marks.

Practical arrangements for sending me the material worked fine – I received sufficient advance warning and, for most of the modules, a module outline or even a complete module guide/workbook. Such materials are indispensable to form a fair view of the adequacy of the assessment. I just note that the semester 1 materials could have been sent somewhat earlier, to avoid a bottleneck in June, when I was sent all the material done by the students so far.

Methodology in English Language Teaching (sem 1)

I received work from 5 students (assignments 1 [35%] and 2 [65%]) as well as the full Module Guide.

In assignment 1, students received detailed comments (on the feedback sheet and in the form of marginal comments) on subject-specific issues as well as aspects of their writing – these looked very useful for a 1st semester mid-module essay assignment.

In assignment 2, quality of writing was indeed somewhat better than in assignment 1. Two students did not develop much of an argument of their own, instead merely repeating what they found in existing literature, and one student used only old literature. They were rightly penalised for this, but it might be advisable to spell out even more emphatically in the Module Guide and in the teaching what is expected in the 2nd assignment.

Elements of Grammar (sem 1)

I received work from 15 students (an assessed exercise [25%] and the exam [75%]) as well as a Module Outline.

The assessed exercise gave students an opportunity to flex their syntactic analytic muscles. There was a good spread of marks.

The exam appears to have had too much material for several students, leading to time problems at the end. An adjustment was made to bring the marks up to a more reasonable level – this was done for all students equally. The results look fair and an adequate reflection of student performance on the module. The material on this module appears to have been a real challenge for many of the students.

Phonetics and phonology (sem 1)

I received work from 12 students: a mid-module essay (50%), a written exam (30%) and a practical exam (20%). I noted that the Module Workbook gave different percentages: 40% for essay, 40% for exam. The

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Module Workbook looked very helpful for students. Their feedback also indicated they were highly positive about the module as a whole. There was a good range of marks (45-76), with excellent work by the best students (who, I noted, tended to have English names – they may have benefited from more UG exposure to phonetics teaching than the other students). On one essay (student 7057), some more comment might have been provided on how to improve. The mark was 47 and this student continued to struggle (exam mark 25, practical 68, final mark 45).

Advanced phonetic analysis (sem 2)

I received work from 2 students: two practical exercises (25%), a project (60%) and a transcription (15%). This was clearly a select pair of students, who showed an impressive grasp of the subject and its methodologies.

Sociolinguistics (sem 2)

I received two assignments each from 10 students (though one student seems not to have done the second one). The type of assignment was well staggered, with the first one being an extended response to a published article and the second one being a full essay. In their essays, students apparently felt drawn towards addressing very large questions, with little data collecting being in evidence.

Pragmatics (sem 2)

I received two essays, each worth 50%, from 9 students (though one student did not do the 2nd essay). Marks ranged from low pass to high distinction – the best essays were marked by very good and strong writing. A shortcoming shared by several of the weaker essays was the absence of any data -- the need to include at least some could be highlighted in the essay instructions.

Second language acquisition (sem 2)

I received work from 5 students: an assessed exercise (30%) and an essay (70%). The exercise asked students to plan an experimental study of some issue in the field -- this looks like a very efficient way of making them see the purpose and problems of research of this type, while still allowing them to focus on the topics they are interested in. The essay led to some excellent work but also to some signs of students struggling to deal with the literature that they had chosen to include.

Psycholinguistics (sem 2)

I received work from 4 students: a 3,000-word essay (100%). Student 5102 was really very weak -- in getting a mark of 50, they are being given a generous amount of benefit of the doubt (as to whether understand what they are writing about). Assessment on this module looks light compared to the other modules -- but in the absence of a module outline or guide, it is not clear to me whether there is a large practical component (it does not appear to be directly assessed).

Applying methodology in ELT (sem 2)

I received work from 6 students: an essay including a lesson plan (100%). The assessment, and module as a whole, promotes good integration of theory and practice.

Research methods (sems 1+2)

I received work from 17 students: assignments 1 (20%), 2 (30%) and 3 (50%). Assignment 1 usefully required students to show a familiarity with relevant terminology. On assignment 3, I did not see feedback for the students -- wouldn't this be helpful for the students in writing their dissertation? Assignment 3 of student 9040 was not included (though the marksheet shows a mark of 70 for it).

Comments on MA dissertations**October 2011**

<<<>>

The literature review is too general in several places. The experimental data look reliable but the analysis is disappointing -- it merely confirms that there is L1 influence in the L2. No attempt is made to analyse the data in terms of feature mapping, even though this is introduced as the central point of the study. The recommendation that feature mapping should be given a place in teaching therefore remains rather hollow. Mark of 60 agreed (a low 60).

<<<>>

1st and 2nd marker had somewhat divergent views on this (78, 66). I agree with the 1st marker that this piece demonstrates an impressive level of command, at the conceptual and practical level, of material that is far from simple. Hence I feel a distinction is justified. I agree with the 2nd marker that the student assumes a great deal of familiarity with existing work of this kind and is short on structural analysis, but issues of length may have played a role in this. What is here, in my view, goes well beyond what may be expected of the average MA candidate. I would therefore suggest a mark of 74.

<<<>>

Shows real understanding of relevant concepts and methods, but sometimes goes off on a tangent. Needs to be told about punctuation, the structuring of paragraphs and general conventions of academic writing. Mark of 61 agreed.

<<<>>

An excellent piece of work. Expertly guides the reader by the hand through the literature and the data. Good use is made of examples and the analysis is careful and persuasive. A pleasure to read. The absence of any note about ethics is surprising in the context of NHS-related material. Mark of 80 agreed.

<<<>>

This dissertation combines critical discourse analysis, Hallidayan transitivity and theories of children's literature. Perhaps because of this, the discussion remains rather general in many places and several concepts/categories do not get sufficient explanation and exemplification. The methodology seems to be based on an earlier study of a fairytale – it would have been good to include some more critical discussion of that study. Mark of 60 agreed.

<<<>>

A clear piece of work, with some interesting results. The literature review could be more focused and there could have been more analysis of the structures involved. Mark of 65 agreed.

<<<>>

Has collected some good experimental data that have clear theoretical implications. But problems with clarity and expression keep this from being entirely successful. There is quite a bit of gobbledygook, which hints at less than perfect understanding of issues and concepts. But there is enough that makes sense, and no nonsense as far as I could see. Mark of 66 agreed.

<<<>>

Parts of this are promising. There is a lot of good data and ideas about analysis but the student needs to keep the two more strictly separate. The research questions come rather late. There is a lot of material in this dissertation and it would have benefited from tighter organisation, overall and in details. Mark of 65 agreed.

<<<>>

A difficult one to judge, as the wide gap between the marks of 1st and 2nd markers (60, 48) shows. At one level it is very limited, reviewing some sources with little clear result and then going on to count the number of occurrences of certain speech acts in two EFL textbook series. At another level, it makes a strong case for the importance of paying attention to speech act realisation in EFL teaching and gives a reasonable overview of how some textbook writers and teachers currently go about this task in practice. Viewed either way, there is real start but also much room for improvement, hence a mark in the mid-50s seems appropriate. I would suggest 55.

<<<>>

This dissertation describes three different approaches/theories of L2 acquisition. It does so mostly competently (though some of the generative material reviewed is old now) but it does not add anything new. A lot of material is covered but the aim remains unclear to me. Mark of 58 agreed.

<<<>>

A good idea to review earlier studies wrt certain parameters, but the introduction could be clearer about the exact aims. It is not so clear that the factors investigated are psycholinguistic – the term ‘cognitive’ might have been more appropriate. The writing is competent and there is good control over terminology. In places, the interpretation could be more careful. Mark of 66 agreed.

<<<>>

The description of relative clauses in Chinese is difficult to follow -- use of standard terminology and distinctions would have helped. Some aspects of relative clauses that are mentioned are not relevant to the experiment carried out and there is quite a bit of relevant literature (inspired by Keenan and Comrie's Accessibility Hierarchy) that is not discussed. In many places, the argument needs to be structured more clearly. The flaws in the data collecting are rather serious. It is difficult to believe that the participants in the English-language experiment were Chinese, but this seems to have been the case. Mark of 47 agreed.

<<<>>

This contains interesting data but they are not all presented in a reader-friendly manner (wrt overall organisation, paragraphing, line of argumentation). Many of the Figures need fuller legends. Part of this work is an apparent-time study, but this is not made clear enough. The student does show a good grasp of the realities of the situation reflected in the data. Mark of 57 agreed.

<<<>>

Tackles a vast topic and struggles to find a useful way through the masses of literature. Some issues are not fully understood and the absence of new data also makes it difficult to see where it is all supposed to be going. The level of ambition appears to have been set too high. Mark of 55 agreed.

<<<>>

There is interesting material here about an apparently contentious term in Arabic, but it might have been good to offer some more linguistic data on its use in the introduction. I found the student's assertions of

her own opinions about the word rather jarring. The interpretation of the results is sometimes linguistically naive (e.g. how does reported knowledge of the origins of a term have a bearing on attitudes to its use?). Mark of 60 agreed.

MOD043

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22nd of November 2011

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2010-2011 MA programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics.

We note with appreciation your positive comments about the level at which we teach and about all aspects of assessment, especially feedback. We are particularly pleased to note your comments about students' improvement over the course of the year, as this is something we invest a lot of effort into. Research training is another area we have been developing over the years and your positive note is a welcome encouragement to continue in that direction.

Your suggestion that External Examiners should be granted access to the VLE is most welcome, as it would indeed provide you with a more accurate picture of how modules are delivered. We hope it will be possible to implement it this year. We also note your recommendation that detailed rules for the degree classification of borderline candidates be defined, and will act accordingly.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank you explicitly for the great care you have taken in reviewing all the material that was sent to you and for your very helpful advice at the Classification Board.

We look forward to continuing working with you this year and the next.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Cecile De Cat
Director of Linguistics & Phonetics