THE IMPACT ON STUDENTS OF BRITISH COUNCIL TEACHING CENTRE EFL CLASSES

Dr X, Centre for Language Education Research, School of Education, University of Leeds

This proposal responds to the research consultancy on the impact on students of British Council EFL classes advertised on the EDUCATIONUK-L on 13 October 2008. It consists of five sections: rationale for the study; research methodology; outcomes; schedule; costings. My CV is enclosed separately.

1 RATIONALE

This research project is driven by a need to understand, in ways that extend beyond end-of-course student evaluations and exit measures of students’ linguistic proficiency, the nature of the impact that taking an English language course at a British Council teaching centre has on students. Impact is here taken to refer broadly to the ways in which EFL classes are felt by students to enhance their lives; more specifically, such impact can be seen in terms of how EFL classes might enhance students’ personal development, professional growth, occupational competence, interpersonal/networking skills, and capacity for intercultural dialogue and sensitivity. These areas of potential impact, however, are not exhaustive, and part of the groundwork for this research project would be to review existing literature on the impacts of foreign language learning in order to highlight a range of additional issues which may provide appropriate foci for the study (some potential benefits highlighted in this literature\(^1\) are, for example, enhanced citizenship qualities and economic potential).

Evidence of the ways in which EFL classes impact on the lives of students at British Council language teaching centres can inform the British Council’s own internal planning and review processes; it can also demonstrate the impact of the British Council’s work to external agencies to which it is accountable and, additionally, add to current knowledge about the broader benefits of learning English as a foreign language.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

The study will address the following key question:

*What impacts do British Council EFL courses have on students’ lives?*

This will be broken down into a number of sub-questions, each dealing with the extent to which students feel they experience a particular benefit as a result of (and, for current students, in the process of) attending an EFL course at the British Council. A final list of specific impacts to explore with students will be finalized following a review of the literature as described in Section 1 above. Discussions with key British Council personnel and a review of the British Council’s key corporate strategic goals will also inform the types of impacts investigated in this project (e.g. the extent to which students deploy English for intercultural dialogue).

A second related question the study will address is:

*What kinds of impact are most powerfully experienced by students?*

While the first question above identifies different types of impacts, it will also be valuable to comment on which particular types of impact seem most salient in students’

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\(^1\) See, for example, the research summarized on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages website at [http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=4527](http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=4527)
experiences. This will allow for the strength of different impacts, as experienced by students, to be differentiated.

A final question which has the potential to shed further light on the issues under study here is:

*Where students feel that their EFL course has had limited impact on their lives, what factors do they feel have contributed?*

While it is expected that the project will shed light on and illustrate the many ways in which EFL classes at British Council Teaching Centres impact positively on students’ lives, an understanding of any instances where students report a lack of impact can also be valuable. Insight into such cases can inform decision-making within the British Council aimed at enhancing the impact of EFL courses.

### 2.2 Participants

The participants for this study will be current and past students on EFL courses at British Council Teaching Centres in Western Europe, East Asia and the Middle East (as specified in the project brief). The precise number of participants in the study will be finalized in the first phase of the project but this will be in the range of 45-60. A number of other issues relevant to the sample of participants will also need to be specified once the project starts. These are:

- the distribution of the sample across the three regions to be studied; this could be an equal split or one that reflects each region’s relative size in terms of student numbers;
- how precisely students will be identified and approached; I assume the study will involve a purposive (i.e. non-random) sample, with Teaching Centre Managers being central in decisions about the students who would be suitable participants (and who meet any eligibility criteria which are set – see below);
- for past students, a limit on how long ago they completed their course may need to be defined (e.g. one year); for current students, again, parameters for participation would be required (e.g. students who have only recently started their courses may not have much to say yet about its broader impact);
- whether students should be those attending general EFL classes, specialized courses, or a mixture (in terms of representativeness, the former perhaps better reflect the British Council’s student population);
- whether student proficiency in English be a criterion for participation in the study; students will need to be able to participate in an interview in English (see below) and those with limited oral skills in English may not be suitable candidates;
- whether the sample will consist of ‘successful’ students (those with positive experiences of their EFL course) or whether a range of degrees of success/satisfaction will be represented. A focus on less successful students, though, is not a pre-requisite for this study and it could legitimately be framed as an analysis of impact as reported by successful students (*successful* students could be defined here as those who agree that they benefited from their course).

These sampling decisions will be important to consider in the preliminary phase of the study as a principled approach to the selection of participants will enhance the quality of the project.

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2 I fully appreciate that attention to lack of impact may not be considered desirable given the goals of this project and would not pursue this issue if that were felt to be the case.
2.3 Data Collection & Analysis

This research will be qualitative and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, the issues under investigation are relatively unexplored, and qualitative techniques lend themselves more appropriately to such issues than, for example, survey methods; secondly, an important part of this study is examining not only externally established views of impact but also what impact means from the students’ perspective; again, qualitative work is appropriate when the goal is to examine human experience and to understand it from the point of view of the individuals under study; a third reason why qualitative research is appropriate here is because it allows issues to be examined in depth. Based on this initial study, subsequent larger-scale quantitative surveys may be feasible, but for this initial inquiry qualitative research is clearly more appropriate.

A number of qualitative research techniques exist\(^3\); this study will use semi-structured face-to-face interviews as the key data collection strategy. Semi-structured interviews provide a balance of structure and flexibility; the researcher will have a schedule of topics that they want to cover in the interview (and these topics will reflect the research questions), but at the same time the interview process is flexible enough to accommodate additional issues of relevance that respondents want to talk about. This element of flexibility is particularly important in exploratory research of this kind; for while it is desirable to pre-specify various types of impact to be covered in the interview, it is also important not to overlook additional perspectives on impact which the students may wish to talk about (and which may not be on the list drawn up in advance by the researcher).

The interviews will also focus on eliciting concrete examples of impact from the students as these will be an important part of the evidence which the study generates; thus, in addition to asking students, for example, about the impacts of their EFL classes on their professional lives, they will also be asked (where they acknowledge such impacts) to elaborate their response by giving actual examples from their experience.

The interview schedule will be informed by relevant literature on the benefits of foreign language learning as well as by discussions with managers in British Council Teaching Centres and other stakeholders. Of relevance in designing the interview schedule will also be documentation relating to the broader goals and more specific objectives of EFL classes in British Council Teaching Centres; additional documents covering relevant aspects of the British Council’s overall mission and strategy will also inform the kinds of issues that are included on the schedule. All relevant documentation will be compiled and analyzed during the initial phase of the project.

To enhance the completeness and accuracy of the data, the interviews (which will be conducted in English) will be recorded digitally. They will then be transcribed in full before being analyzed using established strategies for working with qualitative data; briefly, this will involve (through a process of close readings) identifying recurrent themes in the transcripts (e.g. the kinds of impact which emerge most/least strongly), collating interview extracts which provide evidence for each theme, and producing a summary for each theme, supported by relevant quotations from the data. This analysis will be supported using Nvivo, a software application for studying qualitative data. The outcome of this process will be summaries of the interviews with each participant and cross-case analyses of major themes in these interviews. I have extensive experience of working with qualitative data and have completed a number of studies utilizing semi-structured interviews\(^4\).

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\(^4\) See, for example, the report on *Research engagement and quality in English language teaching* which I completed for the British Council earlier this year.
2.4 Ethics

The study will reflect the ethical principles of the British Educational Research Association (British Educational Research Association, 2004). Voluntary informed consent will be emphasised throughout and anonymity and confidentiality will be promised and respected. In reporting data from the interviews, pseudonyms will be used. Ethical clearance will also be obtained from the researcher’s institutional ethics committee.

3 OUTCOMES

3.1 Key Issues

The findings of this study will contribute to an understanding of:

- the different types of impact which British Council EFL courses have on students’ lives;
- the areas of students’ lives on which these EFL courses are impacting to more and less significant degrees;
- the extent to which students’ use English in intercultural dialogue;
- (optionally) factors which may hinder the impact on students’ lives which EFL courses have.

3.2 Dissemination

Findings in relation to these issues will be communicated via the following outputs:

- a full written report of the research to cover rationale, methodology, findings, implications, and references;
- copies of transcripts of interviews, together with a summary of findings for each participant;
- a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation with notes, to allow British Council managers to present the findings of this study to colleagues internally.

Additional forms of internal and external oral and written dissemination could be discussed following delivery of the final report.

3.3 Utilization

The insights from this project can feed into:

- Teaching Centre product development;
- professional practices and staff development in Teaching Centres;
- marketing activity in the British Council;
- enhanced measures to align Teaching Centre activity and corporate strategy within the British Council;
- communications with key stakeholders in the UK and globally.

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4 **SCHEDULE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project initiation</td>
<td>mid-November 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scoping/desk research (review of</td>
<td>mid-November to end December 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literature; analysis of British</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Council documentation; discussions</td>
<td></td>
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<td>with relevant parties; development</td>
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<tr>
<td>and piloting of interview schedule;</td>
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<tr>
<td>defining sampling criteria,</td>
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<tr>
<td>identifying and approaching</td>
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<td>participants, scheduling visits</td>
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<td>and making travel arrangements)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fieldwork and interviews</td>
<td>9-20 January 2009 (Middle East – as noted above, I will be in Oman 9-14</td>
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<td>January and could extend this stay to cover other Middle East centres)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>23 March-17 April (Asia &amp; Europe – two one-week blocks within this</td>
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<td></td>
<td>period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis &amp; writing up</td>
<td>On-going January-May 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delivery of results</td>
<td>end-August 2009</td>
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5 **COSTS**

Below are the costs associated with the project (all including VAT).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultant’s Time</td>
<td>An equivalent of 8 weeks full-time work on the project, costed at standard University of Leeds full cost recovery consultancy rates for staff at the level of Reader.</td>
<td>£19,615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcription</td>
<td>The interviews will need to be transcribed in full. Up to 60 interviews of a maximum of 30 minutes each totals 1800 minutes of recording. Transcriber fees are £60 plus VAT per hour of recorded material.</td>
<td>£2,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording Equipment</td>
<td>A high quality digital voice recorder will be required for the interviews. Olympus DS-40 + ME-51S Stereo Microphone</td>
<td>£250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computing equipment</td>
<td>The project involves overseas travel during which time regular use of a lightweight laptop computer with long battery life will be required. Dell XPS 1330 or similar.</td>
<td>£900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumables</td>
<td>An allowance for consumables should be built in – printing paper, toner/ink, batteries and photocopying.</td>
<td>£200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research assistant</td>
<td>The support of a research assistant is essential for the initial literature review and during the analysis of the qualitative data. Costs here based on employing a research assistant for 4 months @ 1 day a week.</td>
<td>£1,918</td>
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Total: **£24,998**

- Travel will be booked by the University of Leeds and reimbursed against receipts by the British Council.
- Accommodation will be arranged and paid for directly by the British Council.
- Subsistence and incidentals will be reimbursed direct to the Consultant as per British Council travel guidelines.

Dr XXXX
11 December 2008