

**Sheffield
Hallam
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**STUDENT-LED
EVALUATION OF A
PRACTITIONER
RESEARCH PROJECT ON
LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY
AND INCLUSION IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

BRIEF REPORT

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Student-led evaluation of a practitioner research project on linguistic diversity and inclusion in higher education

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This report offers insights into the research methodology developed to incorporate student-led evaluation into a practitioner research project titled "Enhancing Learning for Multilingual Learners in Higher Education". This was a funded Research and Enhancement project in the College of Social Sciences and Arts at Sheffield Hallam University. While the primary findings related to the exploration and utilization of students' linguistic diversity will be discussed in a separate document, this report focuses on the rationale behind recruiting students for evaluation, the process of their recruitment, and reflections on their participation and engagement throughout the project.

Project Brief

I initiated an exploratory practice project with my MA TESOL students at Sheffield Hallam University to collaboratively explore how their linguistic diversity could be better integrated into their learning within a higher education context. The project aimed to improve access and equality for linguistically diverse students in higher education, with desired outcomes including increased student engagement with the module content, improved module outcomes, and an enhanced overall student experience through promoting inclusion and social justice.

During the design phase of the research, I became aware of the potential impact of my dual roles as both the students' module leader and the principal researcher. This power dynamic could have influenced the findings, with participants possibly feeling pressured to provide socially desirable responses. To address potential power imbalance and enhance the quality and integrity of the practitioner research, student research assistants were recruited as external evaluators. These student research assistants were independent, paid and had no prior connections to the course, its participants, or the lecturers.

Methodology

The project took place between September 2023 and April 2024. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from Sheffield Hallam University.

A qualitative design was employed to collect data from participants, who were students on the MA TESOL course, and to assess the outcomes of the project. The student research assistants were briefed on the project's objectives and invited to attend three focus group sessions at the beginning, middle and end of the project. The practitioner

research was conducted in three stages: introduction of the concept of multilingualism as an asset, checking progress in students' capitalising on multilingualism, and evaluating outcomes. The research team came together for each stage. Every time, first I introduced content to participants and facilitated a focus group discussion. Then I left, leaving the floor to the research assistants to conduct an independent discussion with the participating students regarding the project's impact. This design aimed to provide a safe space for the participating students to reflect on the project without my influence as the lead researcher.

To ensure confidentiality, the student research assistants recorded, transcribed, and anonymized their discussions with the participating students before submitting them to me. They conducted initial thematic analyses of the collected data, and reflected on emerging findings. Student researchers also supported the project's literature review.

Initially, five students were recruited as participants, but by the final focus group, only two remained due to dropouts.

Limitations

Several limitations affected the outcomes of the project:

- **Group size:** Although the project began with five participants, this number declined to two by the final focus group. Despite efforts to maintain anonymity, confidentiality became increasingly difficult to preserve with the smaller group size. This might have had an impact on what participating students shared in the focus group discussions with the research assistants.
- **Turnover of Research Assistants:** Three research assistants were employed over the course of the project. Initially, there were two, but one left due to graduation, and a replacement was hired. Due to their academic commitments, a different research assistant often collected data at each stage. This lack of continuity may have limited their ability to fully engage and could have influenced the consistency of their assessments of the project.

Reflections

The use of student researchers provided valuable insight into the research process and its impact. The key findings about their involvement are summarized as follows:

- The student researchers successfully monitored the project's progress, ensuring alignment with the original proposal and objectives.
- The neutral position of the student researcher assistants enabled them to gather more authentic data from participants compared to what might have been obtained by the lead researcher.

- The use of student researchers effectively addressed power imbalances inherent in practitioner research within a teaching context.
- The student research assistants developed research skills and improved their employability.

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