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Working with phonetics.

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WORKING WITH PHONETICS

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1 Introduction Increasing demands for transferable skills and courses geared more closely to employment have led to development of new work-experience courses and modules in the undergraduate curriculum. At the University of Westminster, we have recently introduced a unique, work-related module called 'Working with Phonetics'. Students taking this exit level module are already phonetically accomplished – holders of the IPA Certificate of Proficiency in English Phonetics, for example, and/or with a score of at least 50% in prerequisite basic phonetics modules taken earlier. Among the employers with whom we have worked is the British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC). Here we describe this new module and consider its success from the viewpoints of the student, the teacher and the employer. Dependent on a minimum enrolment of 12 students to run, it has so far run once. The aims are to:

- develop practical phonetic skills;
- investigate, report, comment critically on and evaluate the application of phonetics in the workplace;
- offer the opportunity to experience the use of phonetics by experts in their place of work.

In terms of the learning outcomes, at the end of their study students will:

- be practised in the auditory analysis of real speech data (foreign language, clinical, forensic, etc.);
- be able to critically evaluate and interpret specialist literature in the area of the selected in-depth study option;
- be able to explain and discuss the role of phonetics in selected applications.

2 The schedule 'Working with Phonetics' is delivered over a continuous 12 week period at the rate of 3 hours per week. The weekly activities vary slightly but each includes an hour of practical work, often in a form that might be described as advanced ear-training. The remaining two hours vary between information giving lectures, progress workshops and individual or group tutorials.

3 The syllabus The syllabus covers the exploration of a range of employments in which knowledge of phonetics is either mandatory or useful. Fields listed in the validated syllabus proforma are:

- *phonetics in speech therapy*, looking at child and adult language, the scope of speech and language therapy, what is meant by "disordered speech", possible remedial techniques, etc.
- *phonetics in audiology*, studying the hearing mechanism, aspect of speech perception, different types of hearing tests, hearing aids, etc.
- *forensic phonetics*, comparing the pros and cons of auditory vs machine analysis, aspects of phonetic evidence and the legal system, the concept of the "expert witness", etc.
- *pronunciation advisory services: phonetics and the media* introducing the BBC Pronunciation Unit , looking at notions of prescriptivism vs descriptivism (and their relevance in advice services), comparing attitudes to pronunciation, exploring the phonetics/phonology interface, the pronunciation/assimilation of loanwords, etc.

- *dictionaries, publishing,* concentrating principally on pronouncing dictionaries and phonetics in language courses/phrase books and looking at content and constraints, the role of the editor, pedagogical issues in language/ pronunciation courses and the impact of prescriptivism vs descriptivism, etc.
- *pronunciation teaching and assessment:* pronunciation in language teaching - integrated/separated? - the role of language laboratories and on-line software (spectrographic and waveform analyses, etc.), comparative analysis and its relevance for materials, testing and assessment, etc.
- *pronunciation and the theatre:* a phonetics-based approach vs traditional elocution, accent coaching, voice studies, phonetics for singers, etc.

In any one year, it would be hoped to give students some insight into each of these areas, either through informed input from the Course Tutor, or invited talks by visiting specialists, or student-input at the eventual end-of-module presentations. We would expect to invite up to four visiting experts in any one session – the 2004/05 run offered forensic phonetics, phonetics advisory services (with input from the BBC Pronunciation Unit), pronouncing dictionaries and phonetics in design (phonetically motivated products for the disabled). The final presentations expanded this range, adding: pronunciation teaching, audiology, accent coaching, singing, and speech therapy.

Additionally, students enrolled on the module are encouraged to consider attendance at any relevant conferences that may occur during the course of the module – the Colloquium of the British Association of Academic Phoneticians (BAAP), for example, or the Phonetics Teaching and Learning Conference (PTLC). In 2004 a number made a one-day visit to BAAP (which took place in 2004 in Cambridge) at their own expense with one attending the whole colloquium. This has a twofold benefit: students see a further application of phonetics in academic research; they are able to compare presentational styles of different papers and learn from these when it comes to their own final assessment.

The theoretical and experiential content runs in parallel with the weekly advanced practical sessions.

4 Delivery Delivery includes practical classes, progress workshops, lectures, work shadowing and small-group or individual tutorials.

4.1: Practical work
Looking first at the weekly practical hour, the scope of activities here is designed to offer the widest possible range of practical experience, reflecting as closely as possible the way in which practical skills might be used in a work environment.
The aim is to move beyond the more contrived or "artificial" material used for basic training purposes in the students' earlier modules (traditional English dictation passages, nonsense words, etc.) and to make increasing use of real language data. Ideally, everything will have a direct relevance to a specific field of employment, given that each application of this skill is different. Accordingly, time in successive 2-3 week blocks is spent on activities such as:
- *Simulating the fieldwork process*, a student with a first language other than English acts as subject for three consecutive language practical sessions, students elicit data, perform and transcribe the items, etc.)
- *Transcribing speech from a video-clip* of a speaker with regionally or foreign accented English speech;
- *Transcription of audio-recordings* using samples of clinical data, forensic data, accented speech, etc. *Anglicisation strategies*: students are presented with

recordings of a number of non-English names/words and asked to devise justified "anglicisations" of these. In a multilingual group, the same items can be assimilated into other languages as well for comparative purposes – what to do with non-native speech sounds, stress patterns, tonal contours, etc. are all issues which can cause difficulties and which merit debate.

Students are paired or grouped throughout and will analyse the data, discuss any problems or difficulties and then, individually, write up their findings. In such ways, they are required to write and read transcriptions of a variety of data, focusing on both segmental and suprasegmental features. Plenary sessions at the end of each exercise enable pooling of results, discussion and feedback.

4.2: Progress workshops

Full group progress workshops are scheduled at two points during the programme (in weeks 9 and 11). Students report back on their research to date: appointments, interviews, reading, contacts, presentation planning and any difficulties or problems being encountered. It was found that discussion and sharing of experience enabled student-led help, minimising teacher intervention and reflecting more closely the work environment, encouraging independence.

4.3: Work experience

To date, this would perhaps better be termed 'work-shadowing'. Students undertake a semester-long investigation of a particular sphere of employment where daily use of phonetics is a requisite. After initial consultation with the Module Leader, students are then required to thoroughly investigate their chosen field and arrange at least an interview with a practising expert; some lucky students will also be able to arrange a short period of work-shadowing. To date, interviews have been undertaken with accent coaches, singers and speech therapists while work-shadowing has been possible in the fields of media advisory services, audiology, language/pronunciation teaching and forensic phonetics. Their total research and experience must be logged throughout in the form of a portfolio which will conclude with the written version of their final presentation paper in which they illustrate and summarise employment opportunity in their chosen field. This is the main item of assessment.

Two students in the first cohort spent time at the BBC's Pronunciation Unit and we will use this here as an illustration of the type of experience that can be hoped for. Historically, the Unit has always employed staff with knowledge of a range of languages. However, they would argue that skill in phonetics and knowledge of phonology is even more fundamental to the job than simple linguistic fluency. Over time, it has become obvious that this needs to be a pre-requisite, rather than a nice-to-have extra, or a skill that can be learnt on the job and the Unit recruits accordingly: new staff will be phonetically accomplished, with a detailed knowledge of the IPA, particularly of non-English sounds. Familiarity with the phonology of a couple of languages other than English is also desirable. In fact, recent documentation setting out the Unit's practices, procedures and policies stipulates that "the International Phonetic Association's Certificate in the Phonetics of English is a professional qualification which all Unit staff should hold or work towards" (Sangster et al (2004)). 'Working with Phonetics' is therefore an ideal background for potential new recruits!

The Unit's current work placement scheme for students is not unlike the experience from which the 'Working with Phonetics' students were able to benefit. Students, who are required to have a background in linguistics and phonetics, are given a chance to put their skills into practice, rather than just observing, enabling active involvement the Unit's day-to-day tasks. They can conduct their own pronunciation research with native speakers (or dictionaries, etc.), and they will learn and use the BBC's in-house

phonetic spelling, along with the anglicisation policies employed to help prepare pronunciations for broadcast.

The arrangement proves mutually beneficial. As well as benefiting from an excellent recruitment opportunity, the Unit is also keen to maintain and develop its relationship with the academic world. From the students' point of view, they are able to offer a taster of the sort of thing their studies can lead to outside of academia – an opportunity noted and valued by all the Working with Phonetics students in each of the different specialist areas. One present employee in the Unit articulates this when she says that as an undergraduate student, she was fairly unaware of these non-academic prospects, and would have loved the opportunity to take a course like 'Working with Phonetics' which, she feels, could have greatly enhanced her motivation to succeed in her studies.

5 Assessment The module is assessed through a short *practical test* (relating to practical exercises undertaken in class and contributing 20% of the mark) plus the *portfolio* (60%) and presentation (20%). The *presentation* is given at a (half-)day long mini-conference which this module shares with a similar linguistics module. The 15-minute papers are timed as at a regular conference, students answer questions after their presentation and delivered to an audience which includes two examiners, invited guests and all members of the peer group(s) in question.

6 Conclusion There is consensus among student and employer feedback regarding the success and value of this innovative module which both satisfies student demand and conforms to directives that we should gear the academic process more towards direct application in the workplace, clearly identifying vocational content and transferability. It is, moreover, an enjoyable module to coordinate and teach. We will let the final word rest with the students who returned the following responses to the University's monitoring questionnaire – the 6 point response scale (which includes "n/a") ranges from "strongly agree" through to "strongly disagree" and "can't say". The following table sums up what is called the students' *overall evaluation* of the module.

	Strongly agree	Agree
The module stimulated my interest in the subject.	100%	
The module related well to other parts of my course	62%	38%
It helped me develop/enhance my work-related skills	62%	38%
I enjoyed the module	100%	
I would recommend the module to another student	88%	12%

Table 1. Overall evaluation of course from University monitoring statistics

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