
LTRG Open House – Thursday, 28 May 2020, 3.00-4.30pm

Background

The LTRG is a long-established group for researchers and students in language testing and assessment with links to Lancaster University. We generally meet weekly during university term. The role of convening the group is taken by academic staff and PhD students.

The co-convenors for summer term 2020, John Pill and Myriam Iliovits, moved all LTRG meetings online because of Covid-19 restrictions. This made it easier to involve participants not based in Lancaster. The co-convenors therefore planned an online Open House with the goal of allowing postgraduate research students at UK universities to meet each other, share a little about their own research project and find out about others' work in the field of language testing and assessment. They wanted to promote the exchange of ideas and start to establish a network of student researchers. This seemed particularly important at a time when, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is difficult for students to meet physically at conferences or seminars.

Preparation

The convenors approached UKALTA because its membership was the most promising source of potential attendees and the event complemented the association's mission. With the agreement of the executive committee, the event was promoted in a regular letter to UKALTA members from the president, Lynda Taylor. Lancaster staff also contacted colleagues at other UK universities asking them to encourage students to sign up.

Registration was managed through an online form (using Qualtrics). Invitations with a link to the online meeting (held using Microsoft Teams) were sent out on the day before the event.

Event schedule

1. Welcome and brief oral introductions by all present
2. Two-minute oral presentation of research topic by each research student
Each student could submit a PowerPoint slide in advance to support their oral presentation.
3. Breakout groups of students (roughly grouped by topic/interest) for questions and discussion, each facilitated by a Lancaster researcher
4. Conclusion with a brief report back from each group

Summary of event

18 students registered for the event and 14 of these attended. 7 were students at Lancaster and 7 were guests from other UK universities. Facilitators for the breakout groups were Tineke Brunfaut, Luke Harding and John Pill from Lancaster University.

The event ran smoothly overall. Discussion in the breakout groups focused on the scope language assessment literacy, research using eye-tracking methods, and surviving PhD studies. Unfortunately, some participants in one group were not able to re-join the main group, apparently due to a technical problem.

With participants' permission, a list of names, universities and email addresses was circulated after the event to allow ongoing contact.

Participant feedback

A short feedback questionnaire was set up (using Qualtrics) for participating students to complete anonymously. The aim was to learn what aspects of the event attendees enjoyed and what type of event they would consider attending again.

9 of 14 students who attended the event responded to the questionnaire. All respondents agreed that they enjoyed the Open House and found it met their expectations. (Selected comments from respondents are given in italics.)

enjoyed the variety of topics, having people at different stages of their project and from different universities. It helps to “get to know” others in a relaxed and friendly, but still professional environment.

Asked whether they would attend potential future events for postgraduate research students in language testing and assessment, all respondents agreed they would attend a similar Open House event, an online professional development event, or a webinar on an academic topic. 7 of 9 respondents agreed they would attend a social event, and 8 of 9 agreed they would make a presentation as part of an event. Respondents also suggested:

a work in progress type event would be good

the slides were excellent [so] perhaps we could do a poster event – like at F2F conferences – but for a specific topic area

Workshops that include practical, hands-on activities

Suggestions for topics for webinars or professional development events for research students included:

getting started as a research student (Q and A with more experienced students sharing lessons learnt); what makes a successful applicant for a university faculty position
research methods and examples of their use; advice on analysing data; current or recent projects using unusual or innovative methodological approaches; technological advances
core issues of validity and reliability; fairness in language testing

We share this information to encourage others to organise similar events to support UK research students. As a respondent noted in their feedback:

Due to the uncertainties at the moment, online events for PGR students to share their research ideas or to update with current issues in language testing and assessment are highly appreciated.

We thank UKALTA for helping us promote this LTRG event.

John Pill & Myriam Iliovits

LTRG Co-convenors – <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/ltrg/>

Lancaster University

12 June 2020