

Students' Attitudes towards Research
Applying Best Practice Principles through a Student-Centred Approach

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Abstract

Informal observation over the last five years reveals that a number of students in the undergraduate programme in Linguistics at The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, demonstrate negative attitudes towards courses which require them to learn and participate in the research process. Hence, this paper presents an analysis of the attitudes of undergraduate linguistics students at The UWI, Cave Hill Campus, towards research, to determine students' perception of the use of student-centred principles associated with best practices during instruction in the courses with research activities: LING2302: Sociolinguistics, LING3202: Creole Linguistics, and LING2099: Research Methods in Linguistics and the implications of these findings for the teaching/ learning process. Through an action research design, information is collected from a purposive sample comprising level two and three students in the linguistics undergraduate programme. Accordingly, qualitative data gathered from a questionnaire and from a focus group provide a description of students' orientation towards research. There is also analysis of students' perceptions of the extent to which the course content addresses their research needs, and caters to their success in life beyond the classroom. A quantitative component provides some measurement of the dependent variable. The analysis of the results validate the hypothesis that students' perceptions of the functionality of research and its meaningful application to real-life situations results in a positive attitude towards research. Findings suggest that greater focus on student-centred principles of best practice in the courses' research components would enhance the worth and usefulness within a broader world context.

Key terms: *students' attitudes, research process, best practice principles, student-centred approach*

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Introduction

Background to the Research

As lecturers in Linguistics in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Literature in the Faculty of Humanities and Education at The University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus, our informal observation from 2010 to present has revealed that a large percentage of level two and three students in the linguistics programme experience challenges in understanding several concepts and procedures of research in the discipline. It is acknowledged that their deficiencies in comprehending the research process has a negative influence on their ability, as final year students, to apply this knowledge to writing the required final year research project—HUM3099 Caribbean Study, as well as to several related areas in their daily lives. Indeed, the challenges which these linguistics students experience with research instruction frequently results in their frustration.

Research is an integral part of all academic disciplines and the related foundational concepts should form the background knowledge of students within the linguistics programme. Therefore, in order to produce the ideal linguistics graduate, linguistics lecturers need to ensure that students develop the skills to conduct research using the accepted methodologies associated with the various sub-disciplines of linguistics. Based on these realisations, a research methods course was introduced at level two in the academic year 2009–2010 in order to expose students to a structured programme designed to help them develop the skills needed to conduct research in general and, in particular, to complete their final research projects. In addition, research activities were highlighted as part of the assessment for other courses inclusive of LING2302 Sociolinguistics and LING3202 Creole Linguistics.

As a result, colleagues in the discipline were of the view that students developed research skills through their engagement in various courses, particularly, LING2099 Research Methods in Linguistics. Furthermore, there was the perception that students would demonstrate their knowledge of research by preparing a thesis in their final year. However, colleagues acknowledged that over the past five years, a large percentage of prospective graduate students exhibit a negative attitude towards the course, and research generally. Moreover, much of the information which they are given in the research course is not applied when they write their theses. Lecturers perceive that the students' attitude to research in turn influences their ability to identify, comprehend and apply knowledge of the fundamental concepts in the execution of research as well as in the formulation of this required written work.

This situation is undesirable, especially as it impacts on the lecturers' ability to further enhance the meaningfulness and value of research by encouraging students to use their critical thinking skills and apply their knowledge of linguistics research to real-life events. This means that lecturers' instructional methods and strategies should enable students to perceive the relevance of the content they have learned. Ideally, this instruction should equip students with skills that they can utilise for the betterment of themselves as members of a community, country, region and the world. Hence, while the lecturer should provide the students with both academic and life knowledge during instruction in research, the contrast is the reality. Accordingly, we believe that the deficiency in these crucial components in the learning process impact negatively

on linguistics students' attitudes to research. For these reasons, we judge that best practices in teaching are paramount because, more than any other feature, the application of the associated principles to instruction can affect the students' acquisition of knowledge as well as their growth and development as 'well-rounded' individuals.

Therefore, as we observe the level three linguistics students "struggle" from year to year to attain success in their final year theses, we deem it necessary to provide empirical evidence of their attitudes towards research. Based on the verification of this affective factor, we seek to analyse students' perceptions of the application of best practices principles through a student-centred approach and where necessary, to make recommendations and provide remediation or solutions to any problems evident within the teaching/learning environment.

Research Problem

This research sets out to analyse the attitudes of level two and three undergraduate linguistics students at The UWI, Cave Hill Campus, towards the research component in the undergraduate courses LING2302: Sociolinguistics, LING3202: Creole Linguistics, and LING2099: Research Methods in Linguistics to determine students' perception of the level of integration of student-centred principles associated with best practice during instruction, and to discover implications for the teaching/learning process.

Research Questions

Data from the research were used to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do students consider knowledge of research to be valuable?
2. To what extent do students demonstrate positive attitudes towards knowledge of research?
3. What are students' perceptions on the use of student-centred approaches during research instruction sessions?

Theoretical Framework

As the field of linguistics is concerned with studying language in all its various facets, research in this discipline seeks to remediate issues or resolve problems about language. Thus, linguistic research provides direction to address specific language problems within society and sometimes provides the solutions. In particular, applied linguistics focuses on the stages and activities involved in the process of teaching and learning, inclusive of the related methods and strategies. Hence, while theorists recognised early the role of learners' cognitive factors in the process, they later confirmed the crucial role of affective factors in the learners' acquisition of knowledge. Accordingly, Ellis (1994) claims that attitudes influence learning. So, although some linguistics theorists did not make a distinction between motivation and attitude, currently there is the trend to highlight some difference between the two concepts. Therefore, while motivation is defined as those factors which influence behaviour and give it direction based on underlying needs, Fishbien & Ajzen (1980) describe attitude as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object. This suggests that learners' attitudes can be formed as a direct result of the conditions which exist within the teaching and learning environment.

Another relevant issue is that linguists query whether attitude is cognitive or affective; they also question if it can be modified. These authorities determine that although attitude is both cognitive as well as affective, it is more so affective because one must be motivated to change an attitude. Hence, Baker (1995) puts forward the view that the main characteristics of attitudes are that they are cognitive and affective and dimensional rather than bipolar so that they vary in degree of favourability or unfavourability. He also claims that attitudes predispose a person to

act in a certain way, but the relationship between attitudes and actions is not a strong one. Baker concludes that attitudes are learnt, not inherited or genetically endowed and although they tend to persist, they can be modified by experience. Again, his perspective reinforces the interrelation between the learners' attitude and their learning experiences.

In this regard, while Brown (2007) has determined that attitude is a set of beliefs which the learner has, Stern (2009) outlines three types of attitudes which learners possess and among them is their attitude towards language and about language learning in general. Furthermore, according to Ellis (1994), learners with positive attitudes who experience success will have these attitudes reinforced. He also believes that learners' negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of success. For these reasons, this research seeks to examine students' attitudes towards research and the specific courses identified by gathering data on their perspectives of their learning experiences based on instruction within the formal context of the classroom. Similar work has been conducted by Shu-Ching Wang and Yuh-Jen Guo (2011) as they sought to investigate the influence of a required research component such as a thesis or research project on students' attitude towards research methods classes and research. They concluded that students can encounter major obstacles while studying in research methods classes and applying learned knowledge. Moreover, Wang and Guo observed that students experienced immediate and long term effects from any adverse influences they meet in research methods classes and exhibit a reduced level of motivation to actively participate in research methods classes and activities. Students at the undergraduate level usually tend to view research methods courses negatively. However, an understanding of these attitudes is necessary to help instructors facilitate the learning of research principles for their students by enabling them to create more positive attitudes toward such courses (Papanastasiou, 2002, p.16).

In this regard, the literature shows that it is possible to counteract this level of negativity associated with instruction in research by removing the inadequate traditional methods and replacing them with more effective methods which are beneficial to the learners. Further to this, Mark Nichols (2002) maintains that the challenge to course designers is how to realise these benefits practically without compromising the principles of sound education. He points out that the overall aim in education is to develop learners who are able to think as experts think. Nichols asserts that best practices principles should enable this transformation to take place in any subject area. Hence, whereas the term "best practices" was previously associated with specific professions such as medicine and law, currently the concept has pervaded several other fields and among them is applied linguistics. However, Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels and Arthur Hyde (2005) point out that over the last century, although there have been remarkable technological and cultural changes, our educational institutions have changed less in form and function than any other social structure. Furthermore, they advise that although the participants in learning institutions are often portrayed as lost and fragmented, there is a remarkable consistent, harmonious vision of best educational practice that already exists.

Added to this, Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (2005) claim that even with evidence of the incredible overlapping across fields, some people in the educational system have not yet grasped the significance and potential transforming power of best practices. This suggests that although some transformation is occurring within society, there is still evidence of some retardation of this necessary change within schools and tertiary level institutions. Such views have implications for instruction in linguistics research which occurs in the classrooms at The UWI, Cave Hill.

It must be noted that the application of best practice principles requires less focus on instructional methods such as lecturing, which utilises those established teacher-directed and

whole-class strategies. In addition, they involve less use of activities which require learners to merely sit and listen to receive and assimilate information. Moreover, with a focus on best practice principles, the use of power-point presentations and other forms of teaching in which information is transmitted one way from teacher to student are deemed inadequate and ineffective; such activities stipulate that learners be passive recipients of knowledge. In contrast, with the implementation of best practices within the teaching/learning environment, the focus is on experiential and active learning in which learners are interacting, discussing and collaborating as well as critically analysing and evaluating. In such a situational context, which is conducive for learning, the teacher performs several different roles and there is more emphasis on higher order thinking. For these reasons, the theoretical framework of this research is based on the work of Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (2005) with their focus on principles of best practices related to the five elements, “student-centred”, “experiential”, “holistic”, “authentic” and “challenging,” which address various aspects of student-centred teaching and learning.

Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (2005) conclude that there are thirteen interlocking principles, assumptions or theories that characterize their model of education. They state that these principles are deeply interrelated so that they do not operate independently, but rather each influences the other. They group these principles into the three main clusters, cognitive, social and student-centred. Hence, as the five elements of the latter cluster addresses various aspects of student-centred teaching and learning, according to Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, “student-centred” is the best point at which to start to determine learners’ real interests. This eliminates learners engaging in a studying content which is unfocused and irrelevant to their real needs. These authorities describe “experiential” as when learners are actively engaged in direct, real experiences, which they consider as the most powerful and natural form of learning. For Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde with the “holistic” element, learners acquire knowledge best when they are required to interface with whole ideas, events and materials in purposeful context rather than by studying subparts of the content which is distinct from how they are actually required to apply it in real life. Then, “authentic” relates to the learners’ exposure to real, rich, complex ideas and materials which empower them as opposed to simplified content which places them in a state of disempowerment. Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde offer the final interrelated element in student-centred as “challenging,” which is aimed at providing learners with the knowledge to apply the relevant skills to facilitate their optimum learning and to take responsibility of their own learning when they encounter genuine challenges and choices in their everyday lives. Thus, based on the foundational tenets of best practices principles in the teaching and learning environment outlined in the work of Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, this work presents an adequate framework for the research on linguistics students’ attitude to research at The UWI, Cave Hill in order to determine their perceptions of the focus on interrelated student-centred principles associated with best practices during instruction.

Research Methodology and Procedure

Research Design/Framework

This research utilises an action research design which is applied research carried out with the aim of bringing about a change or some level of improvement after the identification of a problem. Action research can be defined as “an approach in which the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of the problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis” (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.414). In this regard, this piece of research is carried out so that the results can be used to present recommendations for the implementation of best practice principles in instruction in linguistics to solve any problems or address limitations identified which retard the success of level two and three linguistics students at The UWI in knowledge and application of information related to the research procedures.

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyse the data. Hence, questionnaires were administered to collect quantitative data, while qualitative data were gathered from the focus group discussion. With the primary focus on quantitative data which measured the study sample’s attitude, qualitative data provided a thorough understanding and description of the participants’ perception of the utilisation of best practice principles during instruction in linguistics research.

Study Sample. As the study sample was restricted to a very specific population of students within level 2 and 3 of the linguistics programme at The UWI, Cave Hill Campus, who were studying the courses LING2099, LING2302 and LING3202, it was categorised as a purposive sample. Therefore, the participants were selected based on these criteria and they were assessed to be “information-rich” cases for analysis of the variables. The data from the purposive sample was collected at The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus during the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015.

Instrument. The primary research instrument was a questionnaire adapted from the “Attitudes towards Research” Scale (ATR) created by Papanastasiou (2002), whose objective was to verify the dimensions of attitudes towards research among undergraduate students who had completed a compulsory introduction undergraduate course in methods of educational research. Hence, based on its congruence with the aim of the current research, Papanastasiou’s ATR scale was deemed adequate for this research.

Thus, the questionnaire consisted of 32 questions in the form of a seven-point Likert scale which ranged from strongly disagree (7) to strongly agree (1). A separate column was given for undecided/ no response (0). The negatively worded items were reversed so that a higher numbered response on the Likert scale would represent a positive attitude. The students’ attitudes were categorised as “relevance/application of research to life”, “value of research”, “challenges with research”, “positive attitudes towards research”, “research anxiety” and usefulness of research for profession”. Data were also collected from a focus group discussion.

Procedure. The questionnaires were administered as part of the feedback during the specified classes. Only willing participants were used and students were informed that they could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. They were reminded not to write any identifying information on the questionnaire, and assured that their responses would be kept in the strictest confidence.

The focus group sessions were held after the instructional sessions of the course LING2099.

Data Analysis. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) programme. Frequency counts and percentages were used to present data in tables. Discussion from the focus group was analysed and presented.

Research Findings

Value of Research. The questionnaire used for the ATS scale contained five questions designed specifically to measure the extent to which the study sample of forty participants deemed knowledge of research to be valuable. Figure 1 shows the details of the participants' frequency of responses to question 2.

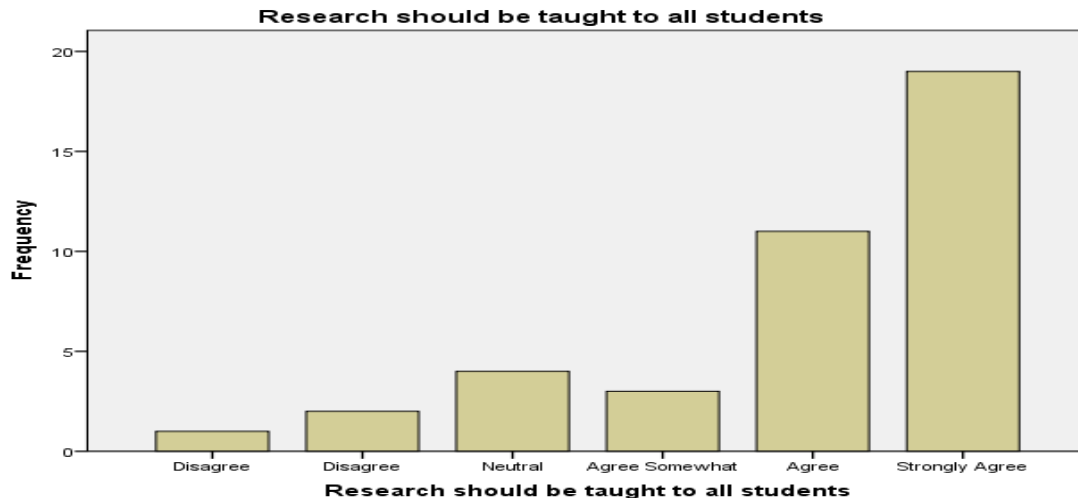


Figure 1. Participants' responses to question 2

The results from the first question which sought data on their views on the research being taught to linguistics students revealed that three (8%) participants agreed somewhat, eleven (28%) believed that research should be taught to students, while nineteen (48%) indicated that they strongly agreed with this type of instruction for linguistics students. This was in contrast to three (8%) participants who declared that research should not be taught to them. Figure 2 outlines the participants' frequency of responses to question 14.

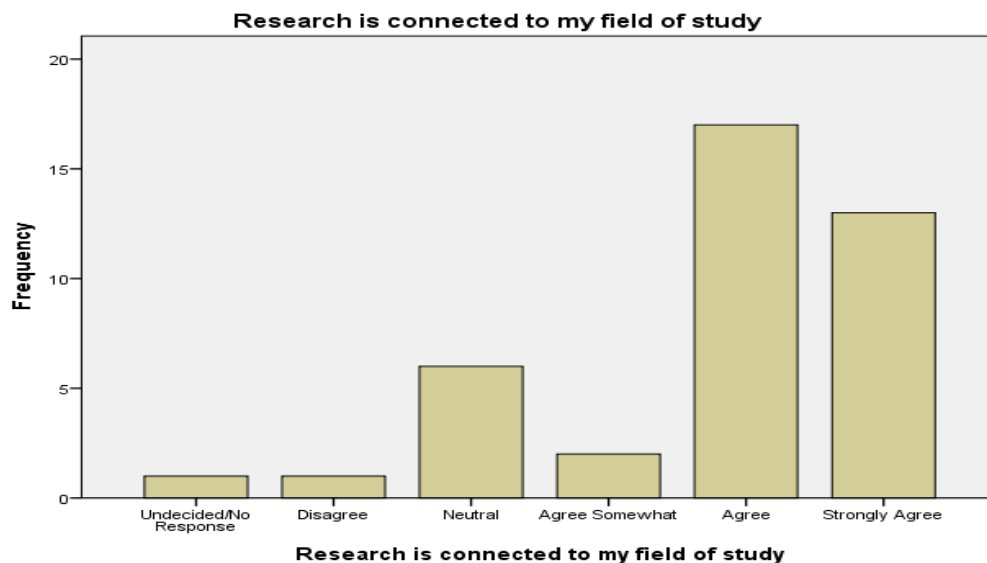


Figure 2. Participants' responses to question 14

When asked if research is connected to their field of study, thirteen participants (33%) strongly agreed, while seventeen (43%) agreed and two (5%) participants agreed somewhat. These data are compared to one (3%) participant who believed that research was not connected to his/her field of study. In responding to this question, whereas one (3%) participant was undecided, six (15%) remained neutral. Figure 3 indicates the participants' frequency of responses to question 15.

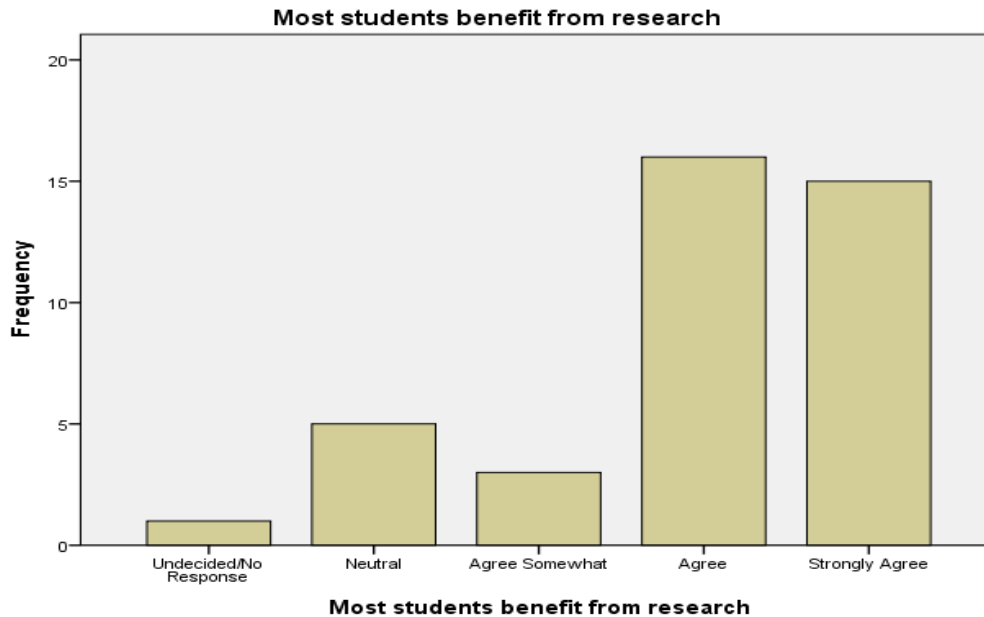


Figure 3. Participants' responses to question 15

With the question 15 which focused on measuring the participants' views on the extent to which students benefit from research, three (8%) participants agreed somewhat, sixteen (40%) agreed and fifteen (38%) participants strongly agreed. However, five (13%) participants remained neutral, one (3%) was undecided and no participants indicated they did not think that students benefited from research. Table 1 and Figure 4 show the details of the participants' frequency of responses to question 17.

Table 1
Participants' frequency of responses to question 17

Research is very valuable		
SCALE	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	1	2.5
Agree Somewhat	2	5.0
Agree	14	35.0
Strongly Agree	23	57.5

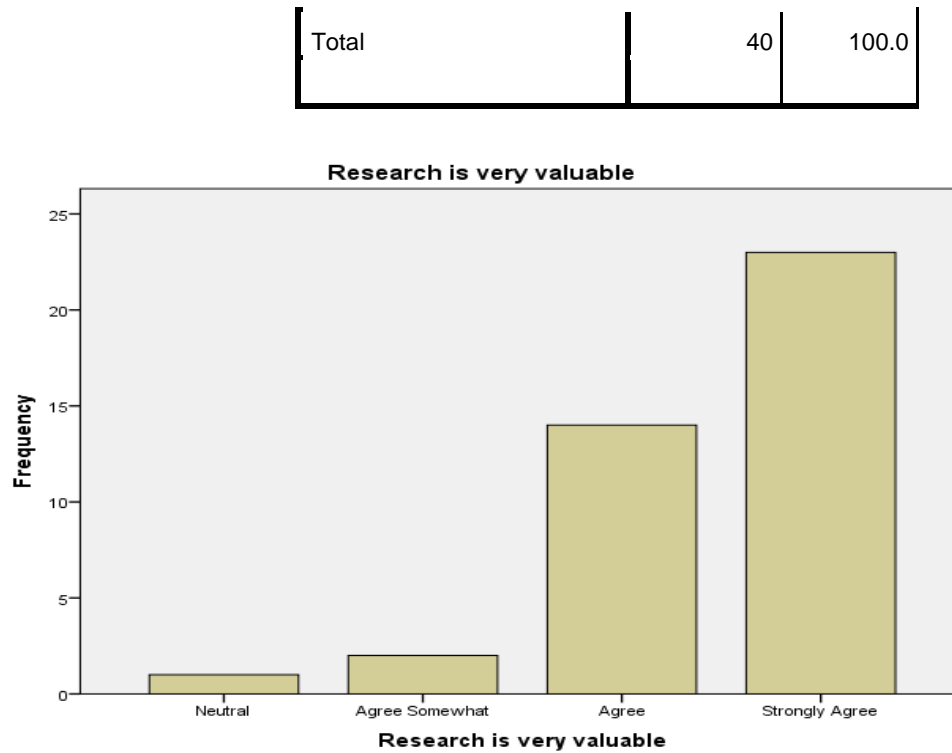


Figure 4. Participants' responses to question 15

The next question in this dimension, question 17, sought to find out if the participants thought research valuable. The results showed that twenty three (58%) strongly agreed, while fourteen (35%) agreed and two (5%) participants agreed somewhat. Based on the analysis, none of the participants disagreed with this perspective, however, one participant (3%) remained neutral. Table 2 and Figure 5 reveal the participants' frequency of responses to question 24.

Table 2
Participants' frequency of responses to question 24

Research is very valuable in my training as a linguist		
SCALE	Frequency	Percent
Undecided/No Response	1	2.5
Disagree Somewhat	1	2.5
Neutral	2	5.0
Agree Somewhat	5	12.5
Agree	13	32.5
Strongly Agree	18	45.0
Total	40	100.0



Figure 5. Participants' responses to question 24

For the final question in this dimension, participants were asked about the value of research in their training as linguists. According to the data, eighteen (45%) participants strongly agreed and thirteen (33%) agreed; whereas five (13%) participants agreed somewhat that research was valuable in their linguistic training. Only one (3%) participant disagreed somewhat with this perspective.

An analysis of the results of these data validates the conclusion that the majority of the participants approximately, 80% are of the view that knowledge of research is valuable. This is compared to approximately 8% that agreed somewhat.

Positive Attitudes towards Research. The next dimension of the questionnaire comprised six questions which sought evidence of the participants' positive attitudes towards research. Figure 6 indicates participants' frequency of responses to question 3.

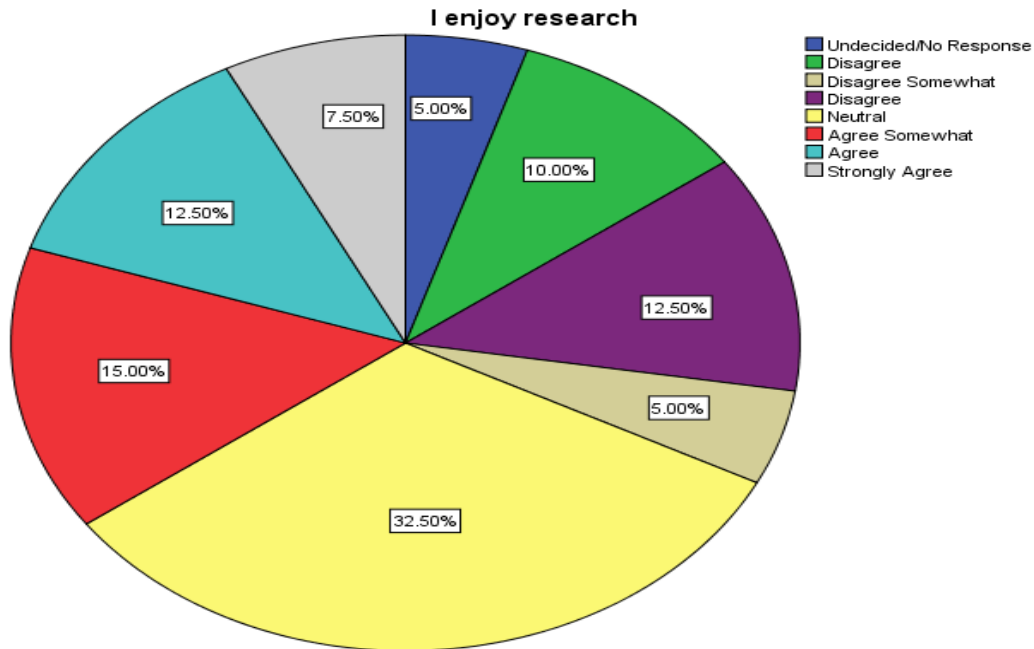


Figure 6. Participants' responses to question 3

In this dimension, question 3 asked participants if they enjoyed research. Based on the results, thirteen participants (33%) remained neutral, while five (13%) agreed and six (15%) agreed somewhat that they enjoyed research. Three (8%) strongly agreed and six participants (15%) declared their lack of enjoyment of research with four (10%) disagreeing and two (5%) disagreeing somewhat. Figure 7 shows participants' frequency of responses to question 4.

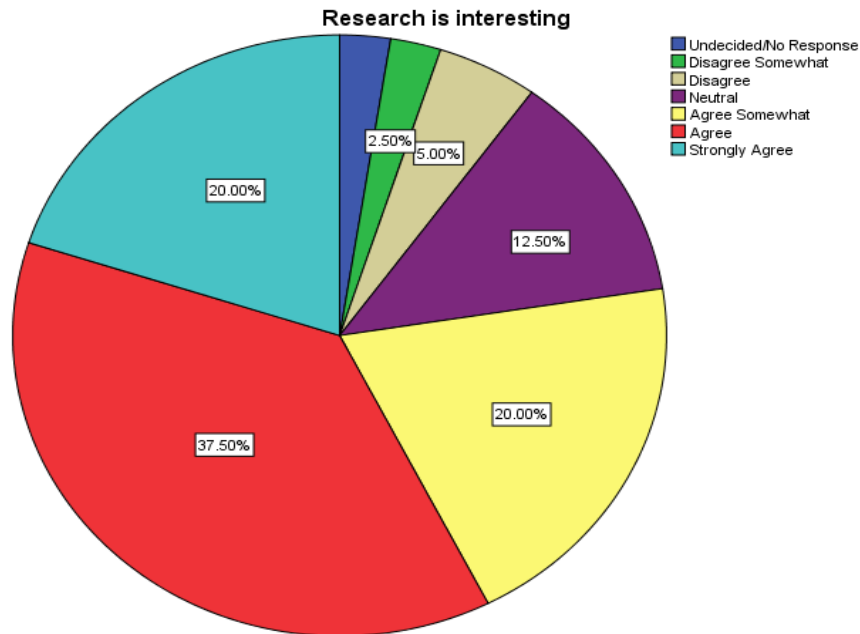


Figure 7. Participants' responses to question 4

With question 4, which set out to find out if the participants were interested in research, eight (20%) participants agreed somewhat, sixteen participants (38%) indicated that they were interested by agreeing; whereas eight (20%) strongly agreed. There were three participants (8%) of the view that research was not interesting. Figure 8 indicate participants' frequency of responses to question 5:

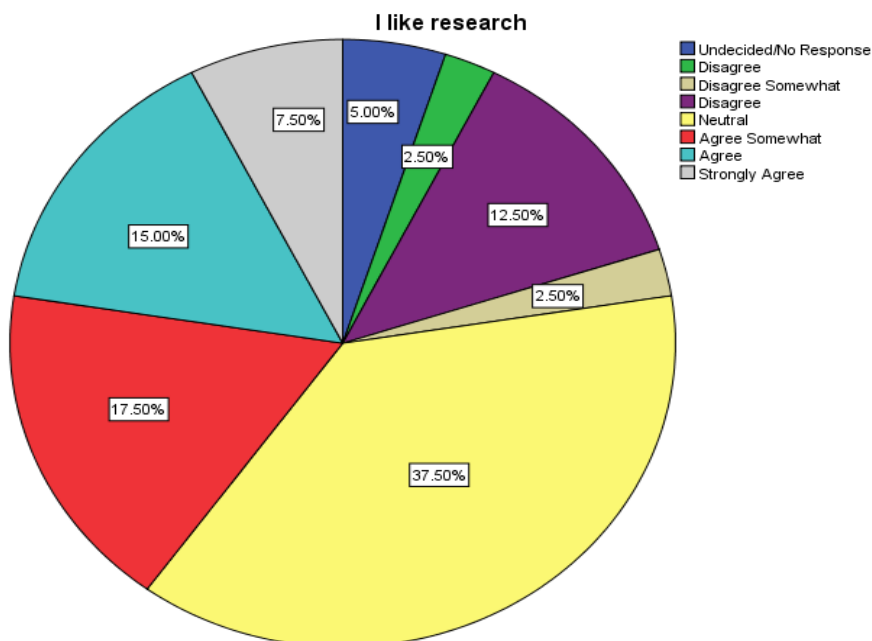


Figure 8. Participants' responses to question 5

Question 5 asked the participants if they liked research and fifteen (38%) participants remained neutral, seven (18%) agreed somewhat, six (15%) agreed, and three participants (8 %) strongly agreed. One (3%) participant disagreed somewhat and one strongly agreed. Figure 9 reveals participants' frequency of responses to question 12

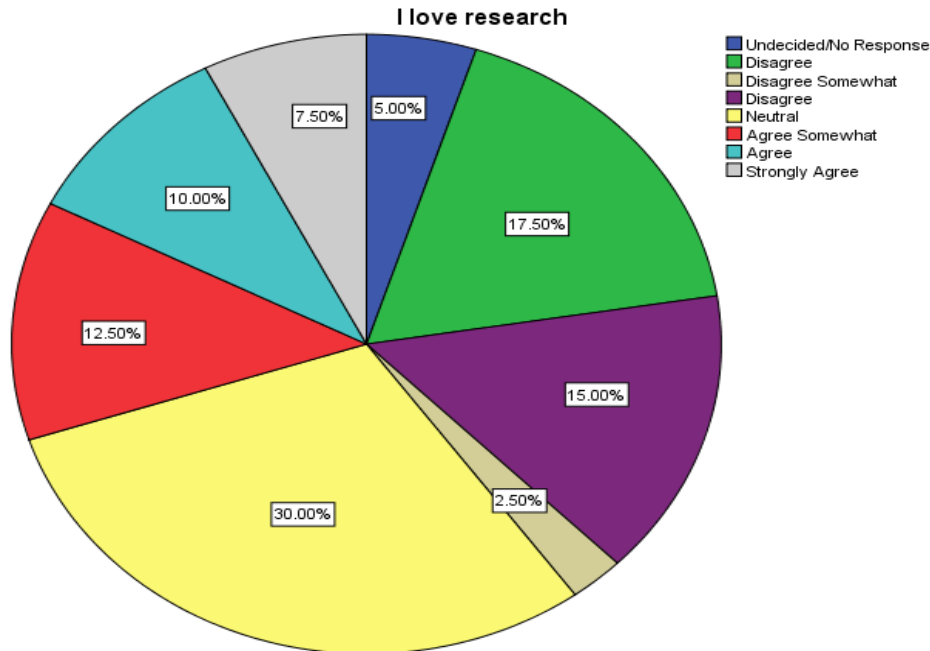


Figure 9. Participants' responses to question 12

The next question sought to determine if the participants loved research and according to their responses, twelve (30%) remained neutral, four (10%) agreed, five (13%) agreed somewhat and three (8%) strongly agreed that they loved research. Seven (18%) participants did not love research and one (3%) disagreed somewhat. Figure 10 provides details of participants' frequency of responses to question 13.

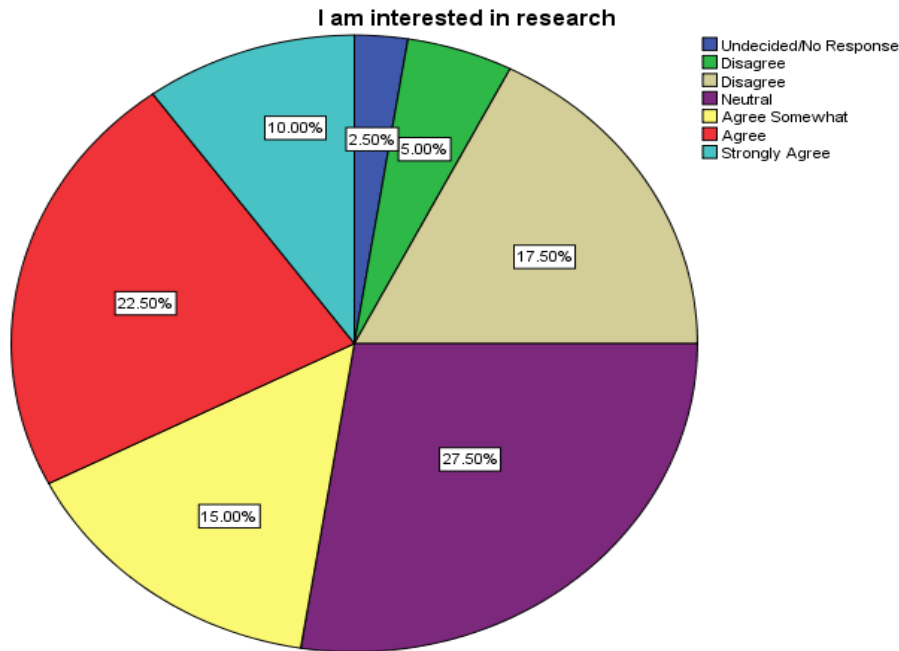


Figure 10. Participants’ responses to question 13.

Question 13 focused on the participants’ interest in research. Hence, eleven (28%) remained neutral, six (15% agreed somewhat, nine (23%) agreed, and four (10%) strongly agreed that they were interested. These data were compared with seven (18%) that disagreed and two (5%) that disagreed strongly with they being interested in research. Figure 11 shows participants’ frequency of responses to question 30.

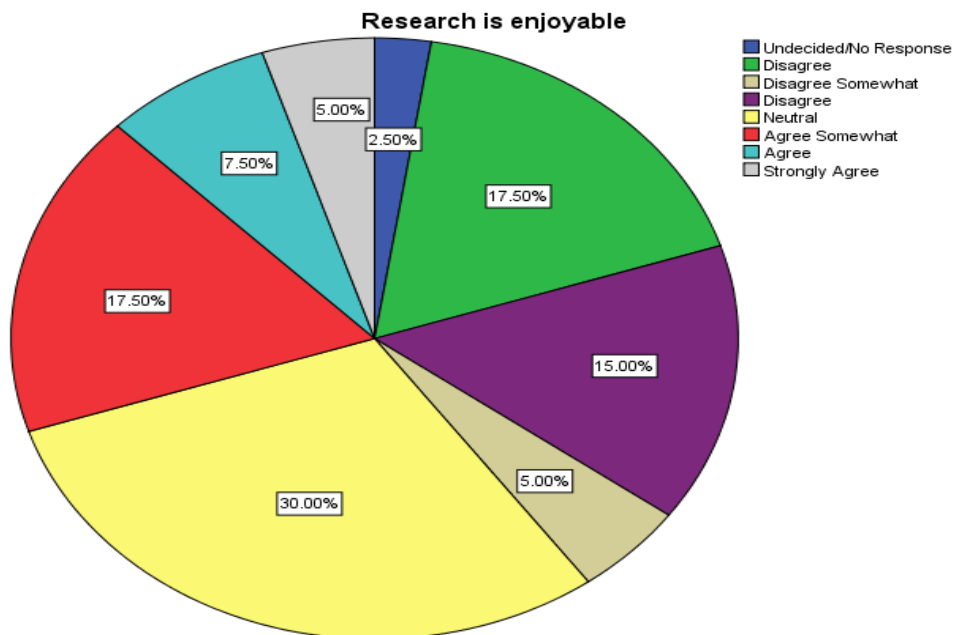


Figure 11. Participants’ responses to question 30

The final question in this dimension queried rather students were of the view that research was enjoyable. Twelve (30%) participants remained neutral, six (15%) disagreed, two (5%) disagreed somewhat and seven (18%) disagreed strongly. Three (8%) agreed somewhat and seven (18%) agreed, while two (5%) strongly agreed.

Based on the results, a high percentage of the participants opted to remain neutral to the questions in this dimension. This response must be considered significant. Overall 36% of the participants indicated that they enjoyed research and 30% revealed that research was enjoyable. However, none of the positive responses to the questions in this dimension resulted in percentages over 50%.

Focus Group Discussions. The discussions in the focus group dealt with best practices related to “student-centred”, “experiential”, “holistic”, “authentic” and “challenging” (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, 2005), which deal with various aspects of student-centred teaching and learning. The participants indicated that they felt more empowered as learners when they participated in the courses LING2302 and LING3202 which required them to carry out field research. They expressed the view that they derived the most enjoyment from this component of the course. In relation to the course, LING2099, Research Methods in Linguistics, the participants declared that although the content was relevant, it was too theoretical and they were not provided with enough opportunities to apply the information to real-life situations. In fact, they pointed out that they experienced a sense of “uneasiness” because, although they recognise that knowledge of research, is valuable, they did not really enjoy all the instructional sessions. In addition, the participants stated that they were unsure about how to apply the research procedures in their everyday activities. Furthermore, it was their judgement that some lecturers who teach the various modules in the course utilise ineffective instructional methods and strategies which do not enable students to experience the relevance of the research procedures and to learn how to apply them in their lives.

Moreover, the participants indicated that while one main lecturer delivered the courses LING2302 and LING3202, the linguistics lecturers who taught the modules in LING2099 all demonstrated different teaching styles. This element often negatively affected the participants’ ability to perceive the course content as a whole. In fact, they expressed the view that the material was presented as subparts so that the meaningfulness and purposefulness were somewhat diminished. However, the participants acknowledged that during instruction in the three courses, they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. They also stated that although some aspects of the delivery of the course LING2099 could be improved to cater more to their specific needs, they considered the research component of all three courses to be important in providing them with knowledge to complete the compulsory HUMN3099 Caribbean Studies research project.

Conclusions

The results of the data gathered from the dimensions of the ATS scale which focused on the participants’ perception of the value of research, validate the conclusion that they believe knowledge of research is valuable. However, these findings are contrasted with those which reveal that a low percentage of participants possess positive attitudes towards research. Moreover, only 35% of the participants perceived that research-thinking applies to their personal lives and 47% concluded that research-oriented thinking does not play an important role in their lives. Hence, these latter results indicate that although the majority of participants consider knowledge of research to be valuable, many of them are challenged in their ability to possess positive attitudes towards the research procedures as well as the application of these processes in

real-life. We conclude that more elements of best practice needs to be incorporated into teaching about research and into the practice of research in courses to encourage transfer of knowledge to their everyday life activities.

In addition, some of the participants acknowledged a deficiency in their own perceptions about research and expressed some dissatisfaction because, even though they acknowledged the value, they did not enjoy learning about research nor did they possess knowledge of how to apply it in life. Hence, these participants explained that rather than indicate their disagreed in the related areas, they had opted for neutral responses to questions in the dimensions which sought data on *Positive Attitudes towards Research* and *Relevance/Application of Research to Life*.

Furthermore, an analysis of information gathered from the focus group discussions suggest that it can be concluded that there is some correlation between the instructional practices of the course LING2099 in particular, and some of participants' negative attitude towards research and the inability to observe the relevance and application of the content to their daily lives. Hence, there is the judgement that the implementation of best practices principles of the five interrelated elements, "student-centred", "experiential", "holistic", "authentic" and "challenging" would enhance the instruction of linguistics courses focused on research activities and result in an improvement in participants' positive perception of research as well as their ability to apply the procedures to their lives. In this regard, the following recommendations are made based on the best practice principles outlined by Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (2005):

- Students in the linguistics courses which deal with research procedures and activities should be given content which is relevant to their real needs.
- Students should engage in strategies focused on real-life experiences aimed at enhancing the natural and meaningful process of learning.
- Lecturers should present content which focuses on whole ideas and events which are purposeful and replicas of applicable situations in real life.
- Lecturers should engage students with material and ideas which are real and based on the level of complexity with which situations can occur in real life.
- Students should be provided with the knowledge to apply the relevant skills to facilitate their optimum learning.
- Students should be encouraged and taught to take responsibility for their own learning, so that they are better prepared to deal with the genuine options and challenges in their everyday lives.

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