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Focus on Research: IRIS for Teachers and Researchers
by Julia Key, Emma Marsden, & Alison Mackey

Instruments for Research Into Second Language Learning and Teaching (IRIS) is a digital repository of materials used to collect data for research into second and foreign language learning and teaching. Since its launch in August 2012, it has attracted considerable interest internationally, with more than 10,000 hits and around 2,500 downloads. One of the aims of the project, which benefits from a wide support network of leading journal editors, research and teaching associations, is to make instruments used to collect second language data more easily accessible for teachers, as well as for novice and experienced researchers.

Benefits of IRIS for English Language Teachers

The difficulties of designing materials to collect data in second language research are well documented. Proven, useable research tools are not always easily accessible, and teachers in particular may not have the expertise—or the time—to produce effective stimuli or design experimental teaching materials. Despite this, it is widely recognised that the quality and reliability of such materials are a key element in successful research.

IRIS aims to bridge the gap between the L2 research community and those "at the chalk face." Recent years have seen significant advances in the sharing of actual data on second language learning, but less in terms of "upstream"—how those data were actually collected. The methodology of data elicitation instruments is not very transparent. Some of the instruments that hold the most appeal for EL teachers—sound files, pictures or videos, interactive online games—clearly do not lend themselves to reproduction in academic journals or textbooks, but can easily be contained within a digital repository like IRIS.

IRIS also does much to encourage replication studies—these follow the same design as the original research, but focus on, for example, a different group of learners, or different first language. Without these kinds of "spin-off" studies, it can be hard to draw meaningful conclusions about certain aspects of second language teaching or learning, and to see the "bigger picture." This, in turn, can hold back the development of more effective teaching practices or education policy. So, while IRIS allows materials to be adapted to suit different research aims or contexts, it also, eventually, facilitates cross-linguistic or cross-contextual comparisons.

What's more, IRIS has a built-in feedback loop in the system, so those who download data collection instruments are encouraged to let others know how useful or generalizable to other contexts they are, how they have been adapted, and to add details of any new peer-reviewed publications that have emerged as a result of their research. In this way, IRIS can evolve organically, to achieve its goal of becoming an increasingly useful resource for the L2 teaching and research communities.

Materials on IRIS

IRIS holds data collection instruments from a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. These include, for example, questionnaires about motivation, attitudes, learning strategies, and intercultural understanding; experimental teaching methods; classroom observation and interview schedules; teaching tasks; sound and video files; word lists; pictures for encouraging learners to use specific structures; language tests for different skills and types of knowledge… and many more besides.

Each instrument in the database is tagged with a number of clear descriptors, allowing for easy searching. You might be interested in a particular research area (fluency, say, or pronunciation or grammar), a certain type of data collection tool (such as an information gap task, a grammaticality judgement test, a motivation questionnaire, or some experimental teaching materials such as Processing Instruction activities), or perhaps you have a target linguistic feature in mind (the use of questions, for example, or pronouns). You may want to search by the first or second language of the learner, the author of the instrument, or even the name of an academic journal. Although IRIS already spans a wide range of target languages, proficiency levels, and research areas, it is still relatively early days for the database, and the creators are keen to encourage even greater variety. The classification system itself is organic too, because it allows the community to suggest new labels. Over time, it will grow to reflect emerging sub-areas of the field, as well as exciting new research priorities and developments.

All of the materials held on IRIS are linked to one or more peer-reviewed publications or an approved PhD thesis, and the repository is independent of country, publisher, funder, or journal. This independence, along with its open-access status and in-built quality assurance mechanisms, make it a valuable resource for both academic and teaching communities.

From Teaching to Research…

Although you may not realise it, as a committed EFL teacher you probably already conduct a fair amount of classroom-based research yourself—really! You are naturally curious about how your students learn, what motivates or challenges them, where the stumbling blocks are. You observe their behaviour, and identify problem areas; you fine-tune your teaching, then step back and consider the results. Perhaps you share your experiences and discuss successful methods with your colleagues. All effective, reflective teachers do this quite instinctively.

Action research goes one step further: it's simply a more formal and systematic approach to understanding what goes on in the foreign language classroom, and then using that knowledge to improve your teaching and, ultimately, student outcomes (Chamot, Barnhardt, Dirstine, & Kevorkian, 1998).

So how might IRIS help teachers? The data collection materials it holds span such a wide range of areas that something is likely to be of interest to teacher-researchers: classroom interaction, learning strategies, motivation and attitudes, learner progression and knowledge of specific structures, task-based learning and teaching, linguistic identity… to name but a few. The variety of first and second languages covered by IRIS is equally broad, with a current total of 24 different languages and 38 different language combinations. Teachers may find an instrument already designed for the combination of first and second language that interests them, or might adapt other IRIS-held materials to suit the language background of their students and/or reflect their learning needs.

More specifically, classroom-based action research can take the form of "process studies," which are designed to provide insights into the learning or teaching process (via, for example, questionnaires, interviews, uptake sheets, diaries), or "product studies" (commonly using language tests and questionnaires, among other things). Alternatively, "process-product" studies seek to determine the efficacy of particular teaching interventions or treatments. In fact, research of this kind can often be successful when designed along experimental lines— learners are divided into two (or more) groups, as randomly as possible, and exposed to different conditions ("typical, regular" practice and a more innovative teaching method, for example). Taking "before" and "after" measurements of a specific linguistic feature, say, can

help to determine how effective—or otherwise—the intervention was in improving the learning outcome.

IRIS represents a starting point, a source of inspiration and freely accessible materials, and, as noted earlier, a means of bridging the gap between the second language research and teaching worlds—for all those seeking to conduct practical, classroom-based ESOL research.

IRIS has been described as "one of the most interesting and potentially widest-impact second language acquisition projects in a long time… ground-breaking" (IRIS, 2013), and "one of the most progressive projects in applied linguistics currently and probably ever" (IRIS, 2013). IRIS is not aimed solely at the academic community. It has been conceived with a much wider audience in mind, including language teachers, teacher educators, and students undertaking research: all can benefit from this innovative and freely accessible online resource.

IRIS is developed and curated by the Digital Library at the University of York, and directed by Emma Marsden (York, UK) and Alison Mackey (Georgetown, USA/Lancaster, UK). It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy.

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