MA TESOL & Applied Linguistics Program Reflection

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Reflection

Throughout the MA TESOL program—where I completed the Applied Linguistics track, rather than the teaching track—I have developed the skills needed to communicate complex technical concepts in plain language, conduct and evaluate professional-quality research, and apply my analysis of language to producing real-world change. I feel extremely confident that I now not only understand how to meaningfully interpret language data that I or others collect, but also how to assess the utility of those data insights within a given system. While I will be receiving a teaching degree, teaching is only the tip of the iceberg for applied linguists from this program. Any institution that values linguistic diversity and clear, effective, and efficient communication would be lucky to work with any of my peers or predecessors.

Throughout the program, I have taken courses that both complemented and challenged the knowledge I obtained during my bachelor's degree. Many courses, such as Applied English Grammar and Applied Phonetics & Phonology, built upon my prior knowledge quite well. I was already quite comfortable with the basics of English syntax; now I can provide detailed explanations of how syntactic choices vary across registers—and what that means for language learners. I had previously studied phonetics in great detail; now I can assess the speech output of language learners to identify specific areas where support is needed during the acquisition of L2 phonology. Other courses, like Research in Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics and Interdisciplinary Research Design, taught me how to effectively collaborate with other professionals and assess the utility of existing research, both within my discipline and beyond. However, Interdisciplinary Research Design also challenged me to think about my work on a more meta-aware level: what paradigms and assumptions am I bringing in to my work that other researchers may not be aware of? Language, Identity, and Culture (LIC) similarly broke down the barrier I had constructed between my understanding of those three topics, allowing me to understand how they intertwine more closely than I had previously believed. Together, these courses (and others) have prepared me to communicate effectively across differences, be they cultural, linguistic, or disciplinary.

I began the MA TESOL program at Portland State with the firm belief that anyone is capable of understanding any concept, it just needs to be explained in a way that is tailored to their knowledge and needs. After learning how to assess user needs and journeys not only through my pedagogy courses like TESOL Methods I, but also through Interdisciplinary Research Design, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and LIC, I now feel prepared to put that ideal into practice. Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, and my many courses on written communication have similarly taught me how to structure my explanations effectively—when to consider explicating information that is normally conveyed via implicature or when to apply certain genre conventions versus when to break them. In the short term, the skills from my degree will allow me to pivot into industry careers like a technical writer or language specialist for speech recognition software. In the long term, I feel prepared to contribute to the field of Applied Linguistics as a skilled professional, even potentially pursuing a PhD in the future.

While I am extremely glad that I carved my own path in this program—and that the Applied Linguistics track is structured to allow that freedom—I do wish that I had participated in the teaching practicum with my teaching track peers. I was able to secure a writing grader position with the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and I learned a lot from it, but providing individualized feedback is no substitute for developing lesson plans and scaffolding an entire semester's worth of educational material. I also attempted and ultimately had to reconsider a Master's thesis due to time constraints. My research will be repurposed into a journal article, and I will seek publication after graduation, but I wish that I had come into the program with a clearer idea of my desired thesis project, which I waited until after my first year to begin. One year is not enough time to develop, complete, and defend a thesis—and given that Master's degrees are more challenging to source funding for than PhDs, maintaining full-time enrollment past the 2-year mark was not financially tenable. I am extremely grateful to have received the James R. Nattinger scholarship, which made the difference between full-time and part-time enrollment during my final year (and, therefore, eliminated the need for additional years of part-time enrollment). However, I would strongly advise incoming Master's students considering a thesis to develop their plan as soon as possible, and to aggressively pursue external funding—especially if they plan to stay in the program longer than two years to complete and defend their thesis. I would also like to see the program collaborate with other departments to offer more robust statistics courses for those of us who are interested—especially if those courses include learning R.

Overall, I would say that this program is an excellent choice for anyone who wants to become a language teacher—not just of English. I would also strongly recommend it for those who may not want to be a language teacher, but do want to apply their knowledge of language to solving wicked problems—especially if you already have an idea of how you would go about it. The pedagogical and technical skills you can obtain through this degree are transferrable not only to teaching, but also to any field that centers communication, research, or even management. Applied linguists from PSU bring a unique blend of systematicity and creativity to anything they touch.

Appendix: Curriculum Map

Course	What I Remember
Applied Phonetics & Phonology	How to assess L1/L2 comparisons to identify points of difficulty for learners How to assess learner speech production for trouble spots while acquiring TL phonology
Language, Identity, and Culture	Languiculture(sp?) Intercultural competence/communication Ethnographic interview strategies
Project: LiDA	Interview strategies Data coding best practices
Applied English Grammar	Where to begin? Factors that influence English word order choices Register/genre differences in syntax, esp. in noun phrase composition and length Corpus-based analysis of syntax Relative clauses; zero relativizers
Second Language Acquisition	Sociocultural theory Attrition/forgetting curve Audiolingual method Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Embodied learning methods
Discourse Analysis	Genre/moves analysis Narrative analysis Transitivity analysis
Research in Language Teaching/Applied Linguistics	How to determine whether a study is using the correct statistical test Judging whether a claim is generalizable, transferrable, or neither based on available data
Pragmatics	Implicatures Gesture Gricean Maxims
Phonetics	Spectral analysis Prosody Narrow transcription Variation

Independent Study: Corpus and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS)	Selecting and preparing texts for a corpus Selecting a reference corpus Varieties and applications of keyword analysis Markup language tagging (XML)
TESOL Methods I	Lesson planning Scaffolding Rationales Various specific strategies
Interdisciplinary Research Design	MIR framework Research paradigms Team design & structure Collaborative research practices
Special Topics: Academic Research	Evaluating journals for publication
Advanced Topics in Technical Writing Technology: Search Engine Optimization (SEO)	Web-based coding (HTML, CSS, JS) Use & application of SEO tools (Semrush, Ubersuggest, GA4) User personas and customer journey maps Web-based content creation
Special Topics: Academic Writing	Strategizing for long-term writing projects (e.g. multi-year research projects)
Culminating Workshop	Collecting and revising materials for a portfolio