



# INFORMING POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## SCAFFOLDING DISSERTATION WRITERS IN CHOOSING LANGUAGE RESEARCH TOPICS

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ The choice of a topic in dissertation writing can be one of the most besetting experiences of dissertation writers.
- ✓ Scoping of topics in language dissertations opens opportunities for researchers and research mentors to examine areas in language education that are less explored and are possible source of inspiration for novel topics in dissertations.
- ✓ Dissertation analysis do not only provide the enormous information sought and expand the knowledge in the field of specialization but they also set forth parameters of standards and future directions to the program under study.
- ✓ While this study is suggestive of topics that can be explored in language education, it is with utmost recommendation that these topics be accompanied by extensive review of related literatures since these are results of a dissertation analysis of a PhD language program.
- ✓ Thus, a Call to Action is directed to the College of Arts and Humanities Advanced Studies to consider institutionalizing the conduct of a Writers' Forum or any appropriate avenue that will specifically direct and guide the beginning dissertation and thesis writers.



### INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Commission on Higher Education in its CMO 53, s.2007 articulates that for doctorate programs, the culminating project shall be a dissertation research that shows the students' independent research work and significant contribution to the science and profession of education that is consistent with the program thrust and competencies.

Related to this, dissertations have been the focus of several studies because as the corpus data for genre and content analysis, they abound in rich information such as explored specific topics of various discipline, trends in research methodology, citation, form and style, and best research practices. Researchers of different fields of specialization have centered on examining the specific topics or subjects in their domain such as subjects of hospitality PhD Dissertations in Turkey (Giritlioglu, 2014), business ethics topics (Piotrowski & Guyette, 2014), historical trends in 203 counsellor education dissertations in terms of content, research method and research designs (Richards, Dykeman, & Bender, 2016), hedges in MA theses and PH.D dissertations

(Atmaca, 2016), citation of research methodologies (Afzal, Ali, Ahmed, & Chaudhry, 2018), gender differences in 120 dissertation acknowledgements (Alotaibi, 2018), and type of approached used, research design, macro-skills targeted, type of participants, locale, tools used, statistical treatment and type of output (Panolong, 2018).

The review of literature shows scant studies focusing on the research areas/topics using language education dissertations as corpus of data. Thus, this study examined the research focus/topics of language education dissertations to establish a baseline data and probably provide a source of inspiration and idea for language dissertation writers.



## METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was used in the study guided by the steps espoused by Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011). It started with the identification of the purpose of the study which was to describe the research topics that are focused in language education dissertations. Then, it specified units to be analyzed such as words, phrases and sentences that are found in the title, the statement of the problem and the methodology of the dissertations. For the sampling plan, the study used total enumeration of 29 dissertations that were produced since the offering of the program, Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education (PhD Lang Ed) until 2018. Analysis was employed through frequency counts and code categories.

**Development of Instructional Materials (IMs).** This review of dissertations showed that language IM development was the most explored topic. The aim of developing language IMs was to address identified language needs. Findings revealed that there was an emerging pattern in the conduct of these studies as evident in the statements of the problem. For majority of the dissertations, needs analysis through adapted questionnaires or teacher made tests were conducted first. The dissertations identified the following language needs on macro-skills, writing skills, reading skills, speaking skills and gender inclusive language. These needs were the springboard for the development of the IMs in the form of tasked-based, prototype, module and reference guide. The classifications of the IMs are based on the terms used in the dissertations and the nature of activities.

**Classroom Interaction.** The second most explored topic in the language education dissertations was on classroom interaction. Using models and frameworks as the bases of the analyses, the studies revealed that classroom interactions are teacher- focused. According to Thornbury (2006), in traditional classrooms, most interactions are initiated by the teacher, and learners either respond individually, or in unison. In the dissertations, most of the specific topics concentrated on the teachers giving attention to their manner of transmitting the lesson, asking question, giving feedback, style and strategies among others (Fig 2).

The studies sparsely took into account the students' contribution to classroom discourse. Ellis (2012) argued that there has been less research on learners probably because they typically contribute a lot less to the discourse than teachers and do so in quite limited ways. The results revealed four topics focused on students/learners: student's communication strategies, structural creativity, amount of student's talk, and student's errors.



## FINDINGS

### Research Topics of Language Education Dissertations

Figure 1 presents development of language instructional materials as the focus of 13 studies among 29 dissertations. This was followed by classroom interaction analysis (8), assessment and testing of language skills (5), learner phenomenon (2), and teacher support (1).

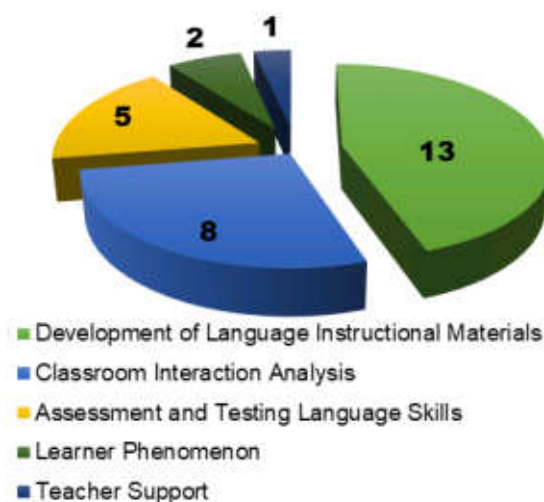


Figure 1: Language areas in language education dissertations

Frequency on Topics in dissertation	Frequency of appearance in dissertation
<b>FOCUS ON THE TEACHER</b>	
Communication styles and strategies	6
Types of questions and tasks in eliciting responses and promoting interaction	4
Teacher talk: discourse patterns, amount, and errors to negotiate meaning	4
Error correction	3
Teaching functions	2
Pragmatics in the classroom	2
Discourse modes	1
<b>FOCUS ON THE LEADER</b>	
Student's communication strategies	1
Amount of student's talk	2
Structural creativity	1
Student's errors	1

Figure 2: Frequency of topic appearance in dissertations

**Assessment and Testing of Language Skills.** The assessment and testing of language skills were the focus of five dissertations which included test-taking in listening (1), identification of errors in written and oral works (2), anxiety as a predictor of performance (1) and written feedback mechanism (1). The first study was conducted to test the listening comprehension of secondary students along multiple-choice and completion item listening test-types. It included the test-taking attitude, testwiseness and listening strategies of the students. On the other hand, two studies assessed the linguistic errors and the deviant sentences committed by the students using student diaries and oral compositions as sources of data. In both studies, the research studies included a description of the students' level of anxiety as reflected in their diaries and their speeches. In a similar vein, the third study concentrated on looking into the competency level of freshman university students in the different content areas and its relationship to the student's level of anxiety and performance. The last study described the collective experiences of language teachers in the provision of written feedback on their students' work. Results include the description of the teacher's varying styles of providing feedback to learners as emotional connection, paper task execution and reward expectation.

**Learner Phenomenon.** In this study, learner phenomenon was used to describe language research topics/fields regarding student's characteristics such as learner autonomy and tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon. The first dissertation on learner autonomization intensively underscored the characteristics of the students' Learner Autonomization potentiality (LAP), its relationship with the students' demographic language learning personality (DLLP), its relationship with the students' language learning characteristics (LLC), the perceptions of students with high LAP degree regarding learner autonomy, and the classroom language learning characteristics of students with high LAP degree.

Prompted by the dearth of researches on the tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon in the Philippines, the second study investigated the undergraduate English majors tip-of-the-tongue experiences. Highlights of the study included the student's strategies in resolving TOT, their attitudes toward experiencing TOT and the priming conditions that facilitated or inhibited word-retrieval during TOT.

**Teacher Support.** One among the 29 dissertations focused on the meaning of supportive relationship from the perspectives of novice language teachers. The novice teachers consider supportive relationship as a process of acknowledging, scaffolding, and empowering the novice language teachers by the administrators and colleagues in the institution.

## Language Topics for Further Research

While the following are possible language areas be explored by dissertation writers, this study highly recommends the following topics to be accompanied with a thorough and comprehensive review of related literature to validate and present the gaps of these language areas since the scope of this study is only through the analysis of research areas as presented in dissertations.

**Language Software Apps in IMs.** Along materials development, the dissertations showed that there was a paucity of materials developed for listening and viewing skills. Although listening and viewing were incorporated in the other macro-skills, there were no separate materials developed for the enhancement of the students' listening and viewing skills. Innovation to integrate free language software applications may be integrated to expose students with the trends in technology.

**Scaffolding Strategies in Language Learning.** The development of practical interventions or scaffolding strategies to address a particular/specific skill or competency may be given attention. A good packaging of scaffolding practices and then testing their effectiveness is one possible area of study. These may be in the form of an intervention, a practical framework or a mechanism. Writers may be guided with the questions: What good language routine practices can be employed inside or outside of a language class that will lead to the mastery of a particular language skill? For instance, how do teachers teach the students to summarize a research, a document, or a story? Are detailed steps like following a format/template, a guideline or an example given for the student to follow? What scaffolding activities are given to students by which they can really produce the required output?

**Language Evaluation and Assessment Tools.** Future dissertation writers may venture into development of assessment or evaluation tools such as assessment tools for the different language competencies (linguistic/grammatical, discourse, pragmatics, socio-linguistic), evaluation tools on the language component of textbooks or modules used in the schools, and evaluation tool for student research studies in terms of content and form and style.

**Learner-Focused Interaction.** Classroom interaction studies that are learner-focused might be considered. These may include turn-taking, amount of waiting time, quality of shared inputs, forms of conversation initiation, and language use in group works/pair works. Furthermore, activities and tasks that encourage and increase student participation like establishing a peer/buddy system may also be studied.

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**Affective Factors in Language Learning.** Since studies on learner phenomenon and teacher support are scant, future writers may consider qualitative studies on inhibitions, risk-taking, and extroversion in the language classroom. On the aspect of teacher support, practices related to teacher development such as preparedness in teaching new subjects, and apprehensions on language research and publication may be explored.

**Dissertation Analysis.** Aware that the corpus used in this study are only the dissertations that are written in English, research of the same scale may be applied to analyze other parts of the dissertations such as matching of the study with the program and university's research agenda, structure and patterns in dissertations, theoretical frameworks used, and form and style.



## CALL TO ACTION



While this study is suggestive of topics that can be explored in language education, it is with utmost recommendation that these topics be accompanied by extensive review of related literatures since these are results of a dissertation analysis of a PhD language program.



Thus, a Call to Action is directed to the College of Arts and Humanities Advanced Studies to institutionalize the conduct of a Writers' Forum or any appropriate avenue that will specifically direct and guide the beginning dissertation and thesis writers especially on the conduct of review of systematic review of related literature provided the plethora of topics.



Faculty of CAH Advanced studies shall compose a committee to plan and conduct the Writers' Forum.



The implementation shall be spearheaded by the Advanced Studies Coordinator and will be given full support by the college.



## MAJOR REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE MATERIAL

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