Academic Program Review
External Review Report
Applied Linguistics/ESL Department

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1. Executive Summary

The Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL at Georgia State University is clearly among the first-tier departments in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL. It is home to a comprehensive set of programs that include an undergraduate major, an undergraduate certificate, a master’s degree, a graduate certificate, and a PhD program. In addition, it has an integrated Intensive English Program for pre-matriculated students and an ESL Program for matriculated students, which together serve as a research and teaching lab. They provide tenure-track faculty and graduate students with opportunities for classroom research, and undergraduate and graduate students opportunities to gain experience in teaching and being mentored by lecturers with high-quality expertise in various aspects of language teaching.

The faculty and graduate students are engaged in cutting-edge research in various areas of applied linguistics, and the quality and quantity of output as well as the impact on the field contributes to Georgia State University’s reputation as a research intensive institution. The faculty are leaders in their research areas with national and international reputation.

The department has traditionally been strong in linguistic analysis, intercultural communication, and language teaching; over the years, and particularly since the creation of the PhD program, it has also built up strengths in other areas of applied linguistics—especially corpus linguistics and computational linguistics—making it a robust applied linguistics department. One area of potential growth is the master’s degree program, which can be strengthened by adding a research track that prepare students for doctoral studies as well as jobs in the industry.

When we compare the Department of Applied Linguistics & ESL at GSU to the top departments in the field that we know, including our own, two elements stand out and give it a cutting-edge: (1) The outstanding group of research-active graduate faculty, and (2) the teaching and research lab afforded by the outstanding lecturers working in the IEP and ESL Programs housed within the Department. At present, moreover, GSU can be considered the best training hub for applied corpus linguistics and applied computational linguistics in the country. To put this statement into perspective, there are about 20 PhD programs in applied linguistics in the United States, and many more in Canada, Australia, Asia, and Europe.
2. Contributions to the Discipline

a. To which subfields of the discipline does the department make the most significant scholarly, creative, or clinical contributions (as appropriate)?

The Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL features outstanding graduate faculty who are nationally and internationally recognized for their expertise in various areas of applied linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Many of the doctoral students and lecturers are also making significant contributions that are recognized by experts in the field. The particular areas of strengths include: Corpus (Roemer, Cortes, Friginal, Crossley); applied computational and natural language processing (Crossley), instructed second language acquisition (Kim), intercultural communication (Friginal, Lindemann), L2 writing (Belcher, Cushing), language testing (Cushing).

Some context for what it means to be a leader in the field of TESOL, in particular: English is by far the most common foreign language studied in the world, and there are an estimated 1.5 billion learners worldwide. The volume and opportunities for language instruction, instruction of second-language writing, exploitation of big data and language data, and development and validation of language assessment and testing is formidable. The graduate faculty and lecturers are fully engaged in these opportunities and make a significant impact on the training of teachers, testers, and corpus linguists who can meet the needs of English teaching domestically and internationally.

b. To what extent are the faculty number and composition sufficient to support the research and educational missions of the department?

Tenure track faculty members are doing an outstanding job in sustaining world-class research programs in applied linguistics and TESOL, and providing excellent teaching and mentoring for doctoral and master’s students. PhD students who work as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) also contribute significantly to the research mission of the department while also providing high-quality instruction for undergraduate students by staffing the BA courses with a high level of expertise and enthusiasm. Lecturers provide outstanding instruction for intensive English program and ESL program students at GSU. They also mentor the department’s undergraduate and master’s students in their teaching, and occasionally have the opportunity to teach the practicum courses, while also contributing to the research mission of the department by providing opportunities for classroom research by faculty members and graduate students. The department’s excellence in teaching, research, and mentoring is built upon the personal sacrifices of tenure-track faculty, graduate students, and lecturers, all of whom are extending themselves above and beyond the call of duty. The number and composition of faculty has been sufficient to develop excellent programs at all levels. Yet, with the pending retirement of a senior faculty member who contributed significantly to one of the key areas of research (instructed second language acquisition and TESOL), and with the large proportion of tenure track faculty members playing administrative roles, it will be a
challenge to maintain the quality of the various programs and give the graduate students the level of mentoring needed to maintain their strength on the job market.

c. Based on your knowledge of similar departments in the discipline, evaluate the overall strength of the department.

Meetings with undergraduate and graduate students made it clear that programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels are outstanding. The doctoral program has been producing excellent students who qualify for tenure-track positions at first-tier departments in top institutions, such as the University of Hawaii, where one of the graduates from the PhD secured a tenure-track position last year, and Georgetown University, where a tenure-track job search currently underway featured two of three campus finalists from GSU’s PhD program. These two outstanding graduates have different research specializations and were mentored by two different faculty members, which suggests the high caliber of the PhD education provided has breadth and depth. Some of the doctoral students also develop expertise that is sought after by the IT industry—especially in areas such as computational linguistics, natural language processing, and corpus linguistics. Master’s students are well equipped to become language teachers and material developers; many of them are inspired to pursue doctoral education. Undergraduate students also seem well prepared to pursue careers in language education, and they mentioned an ethnographic course project and the study-abroad internships as key assets that opened their eyes to the possibilities of graduate education and careers as language teachers. The quality of graduate education is due largely to the quality of graduate faculty who are fully committed to both research and teaching. Excellence in undergraduate education owes to the outstanding work of doctoral students who teach most of the undergraduate courses. Beyond the coursework, opportunities to be mentored and to engage in mentored practicum, classroom observations, and hands-on teaching activities are afforded by the hard and dedicated work of lecturers in the Intensive English Program (IEP) and the ESL Program.

3. Quality of the Department’s Undergraduate and Graduate Programs

a. For each of the department’s programs, evaluate the quality and currency of the curriculum in terms of disciplinary standards and trends.

*Undergraduate Program.* At the undergraduate level, the department offers one of the few BA programs in Applied Linguistics in the country in addition to a TESL certificate. The courses are taught largely by doctoral students who have master’s degrees in related fields and have already developed expertise in the topics. Undergraduate students we met with spoke highly of the instructors they worked with, including the Ph.D. students, which suggests that they are well mentored. The energy and experience doctoral students bring as active researchers and language teachers in a wide variety of contexts inspire undergraduate students. The curriculum is particularly strong in the areas of linguistic analysis, intercultural communication (with a very popular and formative ethnographic research assignment), and language teaching. The educational experience is further enhanced by opportunities to engage in hands-on teaching experience provided not only
through coursework but also internships and study abroad experiences, as well as tutoring experiences facilitated by IEP and ESL lecturers.

Master’s Program. Like the undergraduate program, the master’s program is also strong in language analysis, intercultural communication and, particularly, TESOL and instructed second language acquisition. Students seemed highly satisfied by the quality of instruction and experience, and they look up to the tenured faculty as professional models and research experts. Some of the students were interested in additional opportunities in developing research expertise that would lead them to PhD programs or jobs in the industry. The MA students spoke highly of the diversity of sub-areas in the department, as well as the diversity of students and their interests. Given the expertise in areas of applied linguistics that faculty and graduate students have, it seems feasible to create further opportunities for developing courses and tracks in areas that prepare master’s students for research positions, doctoral education, and jobs in the industry. Adding such a track would attract more applicants to the MA from all over the country, strengthening enrollment patterns, which have been somewhat in decline recently.

PhD Program. The PhD program in Applied Linguistics at Georgia State University is producing excellent doctoral students who not only contribute to the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL but also have the potential of serving as leaders in the field. The doctoral students are highly competitive, being considered for tenure-track positions at some of the top institutions with the best doctoral programs in applied linguistics in the world. They have also developed expertise that is highly sought after in the industry, such as computational linguistics, natural language processing, and language assessment. Their research training includes quantitative and qualitative research methods, and many of them become experts in using mixed-methods research in their work.

b. Evaluate the quality of both incoming and graduated students in the department’s programs, relative to discipline-specific norms.

The PhD program in Applied Linguistics at Georgia State University has managed to attract strong students who would qualify for top programs in the field. The students we spoke with said they chose Georgia State because of the diverse array of faculty specializations as well as opportunities to work with world-class researchers in applied linguistics. PhD students are active at first-tier national and international conferences such as the American Association for Applied Linguistics, TESOL, and the Symposium on Second Language Writing, and their work is recognized by active researchers in the field. In fact, the external review committee members recognized many of the students’ names from their conference presentations and publications. The students who come out of the PhD program are highly competitive; they qualify for tenure-track positions in top-tier applied linguistics departments.

The master’s program has also attracted strong students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many of them chose the program for its strengths in language analysis, intercultural communication, and language teaching. Many mentioned the opportunities for engaging in hands-on teaching experience in the IEP and ESL Programs as an edge
over other MA programs they were admitted into. Some of them were alumni from the BA program, returning to do their MA after some years of working in the field. There were also several international students and local students from very diverse backgrounds. Many of them have developed a strong interest and expertise in research and are considering pursuing a PhD degree. They are also eager to learn more about opportunities to engage in research that have applications in the industry.

Undergraduate students we spoke with were also highly motivated and had a strong sense of purpose. They were happy with the quality of coursework and various opportunities and mentoring provided by graduate students and Lecturers who taught them and mentored them. The survey of the graduates from the BA program seems to suggest a 100% placement rate—they are either gainfully employed or are pursuing a graduate degree.

c. Based on your professional experience, are the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates appropriate? If not, what changes might the department make to improve them?

The enrollments at the undergraduate and doctoral level seem appropriate. The PhD program seems to have reached its capacity for growth given the current number of graduate faculty members available. The enrollment at the master’s level has declined slightly in recent years, and is an area of potential growth. The traditional strengths of the master’s program has been language teaching, particularly in TESOL and classroom second language acquisition, which should continue to be maintained. In addition, given the diverse interests and career goals among undergraduate and master’s students, and given the faculty strengths, the program would be able to attract more high-quality applications and enroll more students by developing a research track that prepare students for doctoral programs and for jobs in the industry. The retention and graduation rates are on par with other programs in the college and seems in line with the field norm.

d. Are there appropriate resources and support structures for the department’s educational programs?

The exceptional excellence of the department’s educational program is built on the hard work, dedication, and personal sacrifices of the faculty members—including tenure-track faculty, GTAs, and lecturers. The educational programs in the department seem to constitute a symbiotic relationship. The research faculty provides high-quality instruction and mentoring for doctoral students and master’s students. Doctoral students contribute significantly to undergraduate education as GTAs in the BA program; their expertise, experience, and enthusiasm have proven invaluable to the quality of undergraduate education, and they in turn benefit from the opportunity to gain teaching experience in various areas of applied linguistics, which greatly enhances their competitive profile in the tenure-track job market. The Intensive English Program (IEP) and the ESL program provide theoretically informed and pedagogically sound university-wide instruction to pre-matriculated and matriculated students, respectively, while also providing teaching opportunities and mentoring to undergraduate and graduate students in the department. These programs also serve as an important site of research for tenure-track faculty
members and graduate students. The support structures are well-developed and highly appropriate. The limitation of faculty resources does require some attention, however. Some of the doctoral students noted that graduate faculty members are highly supportive, but they hesitate to seek help from faculty members because they know many of them are already overstretched.

e. Evaluate the potential for growth of the department’s graduate programs.

The graduate programs are outstanding. One area of potential growth is the master’s program. While language analysis, intercultural communication, instructed second language acquisition, TESOL teaching and assessment are the traditional strengths of the master’s program and should be maintained, some of the students—both undergraduate and graduate—are enthusiastic about opportunities to learn more about areas of applied linguistics that prepare them for a research career as well as jobs in the industry. By developing a research track that provide opportunities to gain more experience in research in various areas of applied linguistics in addition to the current strengths in classroom language learning and teaching, the master’s program can attract additional students both internally from the undergraduate student pool and externally, at national and international levels. At the same time, growing the program might not be possible with the current number of faculty. We note in particular that the graduate director manages both the MA and Ph.D. programs; in other departments we know, the task of directing either an MA program or a Ph.D. program of equivalent size and caliber is handled by two separate directors.

4. Quality of the Department’s Research Culture

a. Based on your knowledge of the discipline, what is your assessment of the quality of the department’s faculty?

The tenure-track faculty in the department are a group of first-rate researchers who are widely recognized nationally and internationally in their respective areas of expertise. The average annual research output of 5-6 refereed publications is remarkable. Several of the full and associate professors are frequently invited to give plenary and invited talks in various countries, and all faculty members are highly regarded in their research and publication activities, most of them reaching levels of productivity that are clearly above the norm in the field. All graduate faculty mentor and collaborate with graduate students, resulting in co-authored publications as well. All of them are highly visible at top conferences in applied linguistics and TESOL, and many of them are also active contributors to other national and international conferences in their areas of expertise. Several of them have been or are editors of flagship journals, such as TESOL Quarterly and Language Learning. The faculty’s record of grant-seeking success is remarkable and above the norm in the field. For example, various faculty were awarded an NSF Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) Grant that offered research apprenticeship experiences to 6 undergraduate students; a coveted Title VI grant that brought a Language Resource Center to GSU (now managed by the College of Education and Human Development and the Department of World Languages and Cultures), and large
TESOL teacher training grants from, among other international funders, the Brazilian government and the University of Valparaíso in Chile. The culture of grant-seeking is also instilled in graduate students, who have been remarkably successful in obtaining funding for their dissertations through the most prestigious venues in the field, including the Language Learning Dissertation Grant; The International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF) grant; and the National Academy of Education/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship.

b. From a disciplinary perspective, what is your assessment of the research areas in which the department is already strong, and areas with the potential for further growth?

The tenure track faculty members are active contributors to various key areas of applied linguistics. Some of the research areas for which the Department of Applied Linguistics/ESL at George State has developed strong reputations include (but not limited to): Computational linguistics, corpus linguistics, intercultural communication, second language acquisition, second language writing, language testing, and TESOL teacher development.

c. What is your assessment of the support structures for faculty and student research (e.g., grant-writing support, travel grant, laboratories, student funding, administrative support, etc.)?

Looking at the success of the department, it may seem that there is adequate support structures for faculty and student research. Yet, it became clear that the success is built on the sacrifice of individual faculty members (both tenure-track faculty and Lecturers). Given the excellence of individual faculty members who are highly marketable, we agree with the self-study that it is important to continue the effort to retain them through not only matching salary offers but also other forms of research support (i.e., travel funding, grant support, summer research stipends, and graduate assistants) and active recognition of their excellence by the institution.

The most important support structure that contributes significantly to the success of faculty and student research and professional development are the ESL and the Intensive English programs. Campus-wide, these two programs are instrumental for GSU to meet its needs and support international students and domestic students for whom English is an additional language. Department-wide, they provide the site for classroom research and the source for language data for corpus research that are essential for the success of faculty and graduate research. In other words, they function as a key element in the department’s mission for TESOL student teacher development and mentoring.

While serving as the research and teaching laboratory is part of the mission of these programs, it seems that these programs are taken for granted, and lecturers feel underappreciated. In order to improve the morale of the department and to continue to sustain optimal cooperation and collaboration, it seems important for faculty and graduate students to make concerted efforts to acknowledge the contributions made by lecturers who teach in these programs, and to provide vital support for the research efforts. The
teaching and research lab functions of the two language programs would be impossible without the full investment of the lecturers. Making these functions more visible to all members in the Department, to students, and to the upper administration would also foster recognition of professional excellence that can be vital when lecturers seek promotion at GSU.

d. Do you have any recommendations for improvements in the department’s research culture, productivity, and results?

Some PhD students noted that the two research methods (qualitative and quantitative) tended to focus on either macro issues (philosophical and design issues in the qualitative course) or micro issues (data analysis in quantitative course). They expressed the desire to have a balanced coverage of macro and micro issues in both courses as well as additional elective course on advanced quantitative and qualitative research methods.

It would be important to improve the relationship between graduate faculty and the ESL Program and Intensive English Program. It would be useful to acknowledge their contributions in the forms of explicit acknowledgments in publications and co-authorship (depending on the level of contribution). Encouraging (and incentivizing) their meaningful participation in research projects would also be useful. Another possibility would be to support their professional development and promotion to Principle Senior Lecturer. It seems there is a need for better articulating how they meet the criteria for promotion (which only requires teaching and service, not research) and for recognizing that MA TESOL is a terminal degree for ESL and IEP teachers.

The accomplishments of the graduate faculty are outstanding. With such high levels of research, grant-seeking, graduate student training, and leadership service to GSU and to the field, the danger or burn-out is real. In order to ensure the levels of excellence reached can be sustained, we advise developing priorities and strategies for managing any new initiatives for growth that result from the present program review. The retirement this year of a senior member and the reduced teaching loads of several faculty members due to administrative positions inside and outside the Department pose challenges for the continuation of present levels of research excellence and doctoral training that will need to be attended to.

5. Goals

a. Are the goals the department has outlined in its self-study appropriate for the unit?

The five goals identified by the department seem highly appropriate. They build on the current success of the programs at all levels and identify possible areas of growth. It is a good idea to provide more opportunities (through coursework and internships) to prepare for research in academia and industry both at master’s and PhD levels.

b. Are they in accord with disciplinary trends?
The development of the department mirrors the general trends in the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL, which have traditionally been strong in classroom research but have expanded the scope to include a wide variety of topics that have applications not only in academic research but innovations in the industry.

c. Are the priorities reasonable?

The priorities identified in the self-study seem reasonable. We particularly agree with the proposed idea of developing a research track at the MA level and cross-listing courses with other departments.

d. Are the resource needs realistic?

The department seems to be doing everything it can to maintain the achieved excellence in research and teaching. With the attrition of faculty and the growth of undergraduate and PhD programs, it seems the resource needs identified in the self-study are realistic.

e. Are any changes or additions warranted?

Developing online courses may not be feasible given the limited resources. The addition of courses in the core curriculum can help develop a new relationship with Perimeter College programs, but it is important to consider the cost-benefit balance.

6. Summary and Recommendations

a. Summarize the department’s major strengths and challenges.

The faculty have a very strong research record with no signs of it diminishing. Since the last program review, the department has established itself as a leader in the field at large. The Ph.D. students are publishing research and finding first-rate academic and industry placements. The BA program is well run and strong, and it provides the Ph.D. students with teaching opportunities that give them a distinct competitive edge in the job market. The MA program is excellent, but as with many MA programs, enrollment has dropped. The IEP and ESL programs serve as a laboratory for research and provide opportunities for teaching, but the perception among the lecturers in those programs is that their work is not valued. Finally, a major challenge is the loss of faculty to administrative positions within the university as well as one to retirement.

b. List your recommendations.

1. Speed up promotions to full professor to match the profile of the faculty accomplishments.
2. Consider sponsoring a reception or an academic event for participants at the American Association for Applied Linguistics conference when it is in Atlanta next year; it would help further raise the national and international profile of the
department and GSU, capitalizing and surpassing the high recognition already attained by each faculty member as individual scholars.

3. Maintain the current strengths in the classroom second language acquisition and TESOL-related portion of applied linguistics by hiring at least one new faculty member.

4. Improve communication with the lecturers at all levels, and make concerted efforts to help them feel recognized and appreciated for their important contributions to the department.

5. Consider expanding the MA program by adding a research track—with the caveat of not overstretching the current faculty.