



# **ASCERTAINING WORK RELEVANCE OF PHD APPLIED LINGUISTICS GRADUATES THROUGH THE LENS OF A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative investigation, “Ascertaining Work Relevance of PhD Applied Linguistics Graduates through the Lens of a Qualitative Investigation,” examined the alignment of doctoral training at Negros Oriental State University (NORSU) with the professional trajectories of its graduates. Using semi-structured interviews as the primary tool, the study explored graduates’ aims in pursuing the degree, challenges encountered, leadership roles assumed, research competence developed, global competitiveness achieved, and recommendations for program improvement. Data were systematically analyzed through thematic analysis, which revealed five macro themes. First, graduates emphasized the program’s role in enhancing efficient writing and research skills, which strengthened their scholarly output and credibility. Second, many reported receiving commendations for their contributions to teacher trainings, signifying professional recognition of their expertise. Third, the degree enabled them to apply theory and practice-driven teaching approaches, translating into job effectiveness and leadership in their specialization. Fourth, the program opened international opportunities, such as traveling for national and international presentations and publishing in refereed journals, thus aligning with NORSU’s vision of global competitiveness. Finally, graduates identified the importance of curriculum revision, recommending more linguistics and research-content driven course offerings to meet emerging academic and industry needs. Overall, the findings highlight the work relevance of the PhD in Applied Linguistics, affirming its impact on teaching, research, and professional advancement. The study suggests continuous curriculum realignment, stronger international linkages, and sustained support

for scholarly dissemination to further enhance the program's relevance and responsiveness.

**Keywords-** *Applied Linguistics, PhD graduates, work relevance, qualitative study, thematic analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

Graduate degrees historically connoted a high level of specialization, normally attained soon after college, for a specific and permanent career (Strat Plan, OSU, n,d). Now, though, a large majority of graduate degree holders change careers at least once, sometimes rendering the specialized training insufficient. Noting this mismatch between workforce demands and higher education supply, the National Academies report (1) urges universities to rethink graduate education to train students more broadly as well as deeply, in order that they may succeed at careers that have not been invented yet, to innovate education to keep pace with the evolving demands of the marketplace for versatility and 'intellectual mobility', and to focus on the future needs of the students rather than the value of the student to the university in supporting its teaching and research mission (Plan for Reshaping... (n.d.). Supporting this idea, the Strategic Plan for the University of Connecticut (2008) affirms that the only certainty in the future of the university is change. It believes that the number and types of students are changing; the needs of society are changing; the ways in which the school receives and transmits information are changing. So, in its strategic planning, the university acknowledges the inevitability of change, but not the inevitability of the path. Thus, the university stands on the fact that it must determine its role with respect to the world around them.

In view of the preceding statements, McCabe (2010) argued that both universities and students want not only to survive but to thrive, prepared to tackle the key challenges faced by the societies of today and tomorrow. This necessitates the ability to ask tough questions, work across boundaries, to pioneer and innovate, yet control risk. Potential has to be maximized, drawing on wide-ranging strengths and honest self-appraisal, engaging effectively with surrounding environments, professions and communities. These attributes are key to the success of institutions and students alike. If experts view these graduate attributes within the context of work and career, they see students' ability to be successful and have impact, both in the short and long term – in other words, their employability. The challenges are well known and pronounced within the labor market in particular, but students who have been given and have grasped the range of opportunities available while at the university, will have both maximized the value of their time and enhanced their employability. Such students stand out from the crowd within today's increasingly competitive labor market. For McCabe (2010), employability is not the same as gaining a graduate job; rather it implies something about the necessary attributes and capacity of the graduate to function and be successful in a job and be able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout their life

To become employable, Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, and Watts (2000 in Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014) assert that the graduate attributes to make them employable point to the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and consequently shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen. Additionally, Nagarajan & Edwards (2014) articulate that these graduate attributes sometimes referred to as generic skills, transferable skills, core skills, soft skills, graduate capabilities, work-ready skills and key skills which are no longer seen as being independent of discipline knowledge because they interact with discipline knowledge. For Barrie (2004 in Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014), they are a specialized and differentiated form of understanding generic abilities, that are developed to meet the needs of a specific discipline or field of knowledge. According to James et al. (2004 cited in Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014), graduate attribute development takes place mostly within disciplines.

The present study however does not specifically quantify the graduate student employment because the graduates of PhD Applied Linguistics program at NORSU have already been at regular work employment in their respective academic stations. The aim therefore of this undertaking is to ascertain the work relevance of PhD Applied Linguistics graduates vis a vis the university's Vision, Mission, Goals as well the Objectives of the program. It is believed that the school's VMGO would solidly set the students' future career pathways. To achieve the aim of the study, the qualitative research approach is used. Whitehead and Whitehead (2016) argue that unlike quantitative research approaches, which aim to establish statistical significance by sampling a predetermined number of subjects or elements, qualitative researchers do not always begin a study with a predetermined sample size. They assert that in qualitative research, there are no overall formal criteria for determining sample size and, therefore, no rules to suggest when a sample size is small or large enough for the study. Essentially, the 'richness' of data collected is far more important than the number of participants. Thus, it is fit and proper to say that 'rich' is quality in qualitative research endeavor. And one way of identifying 'richness' of data collection is when the collected data have already reached saturation. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012, cited in Fusch & Ness, 2015), when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained (Guest et al., 2006 in Fusch, & Ness, 2015), and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006 in Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## **Research Questions**

This research approach provides rich, nuanced insights into the work relevance, challenges, and opportunities faced by Applied Linguistics PhD holders, thus informing both academic program development and labor market alignment.

The questions that were asked to obtain the relevant data are given below.

1. What were your aims in pursuing a PhD degree in Applied Linguistics at NORSU?

2. While earning courses under the PhD in Applied Linguistics program, what challenges did you encounter at NORSU?
3. NORSU graduate school has aimed for its graduates in PhD in Applied Linguistics to demonstrate a dynamic and effective leadership in their English specialization. How has this translated in your work now?
4. The main objective of the PhD in Applied Linguistics program is for the graduates to internalize relevant theoretical knowledge needed for the conduct of scholarly researches. In what ways did these provide you opportunities to enhance your (1) teaching competence and (2) research capability in your area of specialization at your present work?
5. Comment on global competitiveness as reflected in NORSU's vision. In what ways did your PhD in Applied Linguistics degree open new doors for you?
6. If you find it necessary, what suggestions could you give for possible realignment to improve the offering of courses under the PhD in Applied Linguistics program at NORSU?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study “Ascertaining Work Relevance of PhD Applied Linguistics Graduates through the Lens of a Qualitative Investigation” employs a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore how doctoral graduates in Applied Linguistics apply their advanced linguistic knowledge and skills in professional contexts. In-depth interviews serve as the primary instrument, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences, career trajectories, and perceptions of the alignment between their academic training, workplace demands, and NORSU vision. Through coding and categorizing responses, themes emerge that highlight significant areas of academic expertise.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This part of the present paper provides the results obtained from the conduct of the interview in which the data generated from it are discussed thoroughly.

From the data, common themes or linguistic essences that united several units of relevant meaning have been determined. The present investigation has looked for common themes out of the extracted data from the interview. This procedure requires determination of textual regularity of theme occurrences. From the data that dwelt on general meanings, the twelve (12) themes gathered were:

1. Strengthening teaching job effectiveness
2. Time management
3. Enhancing efficient writing and research skills
4. Attendance to specialized trainings
5. Work commendation for huge contribution to teacher trainings
6. Theory and practice-driven teaching approaches

7. Student-centered approach to language teaching
8. Publication to refereed journals
9. International research presentations
10. Academic connections with international colleagues
11. Curriculum revision
12. Research and linguistic-driven course offerings

From these themes, five emergent contextualized themes have comprised the work relevance of PhD Applied Linguistics NORSU graduates vis a vis the university's VMGOs, namely:

1. Enhancing efficient writing and research skills
2. Receiving work commendations for relevant contributions to teachers' trainings
3. Applying theory and practice-driven teaching approaches for job effectiveness
4. Travelling for international presentations and publishing in refereed journals
5. Conducting curriculum revision emphasizing linguistic and research-content driven course offerings

Found below are the detailed pieces of discussion that laser-focuses on the five emergent contextualized themes.

### **1. Enhancing efficient writing and research skills**

It can be pointed out in the data that one of the challenges that could be encountered in graduate studies is the bulk of research writing requirements. This can be challenging for graduate students because the tradition to learn the rules that ensure a high level of subject knowledge and the need to resolve constantly occurring situations of diverse difficulty and uncertainty require research competence (Ruchinaa, et al., 2015). For them, this means that the courses of the doctoral training keep on changing that assume new approaches, methods, and technologies. They continue to explain that the students' performance of research work helps them to understand the field and scope of their professional activities and is an initial step in research design in which this research design involves the creation of the environment that helps students to form a deliberate attitude toward their studies, scientific work, and future profession. However, this huge research responsibilities in graduate work have been challenging to NORSU PhD Applied Linguistics students because their current administrative job works in which most of the time have eaten out their precious time and energy, have to be overcome to satisfy quality research course assignments to be produced and submitted on or before the submission deadlines.

It is in this academic journey of the graduate students that their research skills are additionally honed and shaped to strengthen their preparations for more demanding

research tasks ahead of them. This is the very reason why the NORSU graduate school has stipulated in one of its goals to stimulate basic and applied research quality, especially in identified priority areas for regional and national development in support of national efforts to evolve a culture of quality, productivity, and development in an increasingly global context. Hence, graduate students are expected to undertake research in order to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning as well as to the cultivation of innovation to improve the beneficiaries' quality of life in general.

## **2. Receiving work commendations for relevant contribution to teachers' trainings**

Giving recognition and appreciation for employees for doing an exemplary job in any organizations is very important. Robins (2019) asserts that giving recognition in the form of positive feedback based on results or performance sometimes can happen in a formal way like giving an award, a bonus, a promotion, a raise.; or sometimes it can be given more informally like a verbal thank you and a handwritten note. For him, all of these methods can be meaningful, especially if they are done in a timely and genuine way. He emphasized that giving recognition is limited to (1) performance-based - so it is conditional, (2) it is based on the past - so it is about what people have already done, (3) it is scarce – so there is a limited amount of recognition to go around, and (4) it generally has to come from the top – so many organizations have set up programs that allow peers to highlight each other's efforts. In an academic organization, a certain faculty member can get work commendations when he/she is invited to be a resource speaker in teacher development training or any other relevant invitations needing his/her expertise.

Today, teacher training and professional development are seen as central mechanisms for the improvement of teachers' content knowledge and their teaching skills and practices in order to meet high educational standards (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995 cited in Boudersa, 2016). To them, it is usually conducted because the demands for quality in teaching and learning increase in the different levels of education to meet academic standards where this calls for attention to be directed to the provision of effective professional development on the part of the teachers, researchers, educational institutions, and soon and so forth. On the part of the PhD Applied Linguistics graduates, "*commendations for relevant contributions*" when invited to speak in teachers' trainings have been, most of the time, expressed in a verbal 'thank you' coming from their superiors or in getting tangible things has been on receiving certificates of recognition. For them, receiving work commendations as an employer feedback where the said superiors have represented is already huge to them because their efforts to train harder in graduate school academics and trainings have shown good results. To them, rewards are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature. Relative to the graduate school goals, this a clear proof that the graduate students have continually enhanced their skills and expertise in their field of specialization, in this case, the English language, that has paved the way for them to get invited to share expertise in their respective academic organizations.

### **3. Applying theory and practice-driven teaching approaches for job effectiveness**

Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) articulate that educators in professional or service-related fields have desired in their students to not only learn theory and understand why theories are important, but also to learn how to apply the theoretical frameworks in practice. To them, they have observed that too often people hear anecdotal accounts of students in internships who are unable to make this transition from theory to practice with confidence and effectiveness. Perhaps, they have enunciated that the difficulty in making the transition from theory to practice arises, at least in part, from a failure of the teacher to integrate both theory and practice into the same course in the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the students. If such integration could have done would help students to more closely associate the practical value of learning theoretical concepts. It is imperative then that students in professional programs would be able to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom.

For the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates, they have understood that communicative language teaching (CLT) has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practices around the world since its introduction in the 1970s as advanced by Dell Hymes, Halliday, Littlewood, and many other applied linguists. This has been a strong response to a dissatisfaction over the past fifty years (50) of emphasizing the mastery of the structures of language (Spada, 2006 in Ahmad & Rao, 2012). Richards (2006) argues that the centrality of grammar then in language teaching and learning was questioned because the language ability involved is much more than the grammatical competence. He adds that while the grammatical competence was needed to produce grammatically correct sentences, attention shifted to the knowledge and skills needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes such as making requests, giving advice, making suggestions, describing wishes and needs, and so on. What was needed in order to use language communicatively was communicative competence.

In this vein, it follows then that the authentic classroom practices of learning the second language must be backed up by the linguistic theories; in other words, the theories and practices in language teaching have to be married in order to attain the holistic approach in language teaching and learning. For English teachers to attain effectiveness in their job as classroom teachers, communication should be treated as the ultimate goal of language learning that is achieved through movement and chat interaction with others. Because of this blend, CLT is strongly considered to be an interactionist theory of learning and is now very much essential for effective second language teaching (Lavadenz, 2011). To make it more pronounce, the field of applied linguistics may not only focus on classroom pedagogy but this can also perforate to other fields such as education, psychology, sociolinguistics, language acquisition, etc. as possible area of studies in order to examine how applied linguistics can be employed to understand real-life problems

In consonance with the objectives of the PhD Applied Linguistics program, the preceding elucidation relates to the acquisition of teaching competence in English through innovative and dynamic instruction fueled by the development and enhancement of skills in scholarly research and theoretical knowledge. Thus, the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates have understood very well the relevance of the underpinnings that would serve as the foundation of their teaching practices that when correctly followed creates an atmosphere of effectiveness in their classroom teaching sessions with their valued students.

#### **4. Travelling for international presentations and publishing in refereed journals**

Research undertakings are considered vital and meaningful in the overall operations of the academic community (Olvido, 2021). Sitting as a panel member in an oral defense, supervising and mentoring researchers, writing research papers and presenting them in the national and international conferences are agents for enhancing research culture (Narbarte & Balila, 2018 cited in Olvido, 2021). This is so because the university is highly regarded as institutions of higher learning that is in the business of generating knowledge for innovations and commercialization. Along this vein, the Commission on Higher Education believes that national direction and state investments in research, innovation and extension in higher education institutions must be anchored on the delivery-applied research continuum which maintains a balance between discovery and applied research (CHED CMO, No. 52, S of 2016).

Additionally, Galleto (2016) argues that research output is an essential aspect of assessment for academic positions. For him, it remains the responsibility of the institution to encourage researchers with grants and collaboration with other researchers across discipline. However, it is not enough to publish. Research output and findings from the nation's tertiary institutions must have an impact on industrial, commercial, and administrative processes on all fronts which direct graduates from institutions to use modern techniques to get jobs done. The need to strengthen the culture of research in higher education institutions have been backed up by a Joint Circular No. 1, series of 2016 which stipulates that research outputs for SUCS levelling may comprise (1) completed research-based papers or articles that are published in CHED accredited journals; or international refereed publications such as ELSEVIER, SCOPUS, and Thomson Reuter Journals and (2) research-based papers presented in international, national, or regional fora or conferences, including in-house conference.

Responding to the importance of improving the landscape of education in the country, the Department of Education too believes that doing action research would improve educational practices or resolve problems in any operating unit (i.e. school, classroom, office) (Llego, 2020). Based on this, DepEd's policy development process, research agenda, and policy and program development and implementation has centered on the continued promotion and strengthening of the culture of research in basic education. Hence, the DepEd establishes the **Research Management Guidelines (RMG)** to provide guidance in managing research initiatives in the national, regional, schools

division, and school levels. The enclosed policy also improves support mechanisms for research such as funding, partnerships, and capacity building.

With these, the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates who have found regular/stable employment in SUCs have managed to undertake research for national and international research paper presentations as the first step toward publishing in refereed journals especially those coming from higher education institution. Attached to this research undertaking is the aim to make instruction delivery research-based in order to establish authenticity in every lesson discussion as it clearly addresses classroom problems that must be given solutions that anchor on evidence-based results. Gleaned from these, the PhD in Applied Linguistics program at the NORSU graduate school has strongly prepared its graduates to become researchers for them to be competitive in their line of expertise as they would have an opportunity to disseminate the results of their researches not just in national fora but also in international conferences/publications making their presence slowly felt in the global academic stage. This is highly articulated in the vision of the university as well as the objectives of the program to conduct research studies which are relevant to English teaching as their area of specialization with the bigger purpose of becoming responsive in all fronts, and in this case, international/global in nature.

#### **5. Conducting curriculum revision emphasizing linguistic and research-content driven course offerings**

Curriculum review is an academic, staff-led critical examination of each undergraduate and course-based master's program for the purpose of optimizing the learning outcomes of that program (University of Calgary, 2013 in Dyjur & Kalu, 2016). For them, doing curriculum review for both the program and the courses have to follow certain principles expressed in series of questions: for the program, these questions are: what are the strengths of the program?, how are program-level learning outcomes addressed in specific courses within the program?, are there any gaps? redundancies? is there misalignment?, how can we make our program more innovative?, are we preparing our students for future experiences?; For student engagement: how are we providing feedback to students across the program?, how are we fostering collaborative work in our courses?, what high-impact educational practices are implemented in our program, and where? And questions for the courses in doing curriculum review are: do we have the right core (required) courses in the program?, are our pre-requisite courses preparing students for upper-level courses?, to what extent do teaching and learning activities scaffold student learning?, is more diversity needed in the strategies being used?, to what extent do student assessment strategies support and capture student learning?, is more diversity needed in the assessment strategies being used?, in learning technologies: what practices exist in our program regarding the flipped classroom model?, what opportunities exist to expand our online course offerings?, what approaches are different instructors taking to multiple sections of the course?, how consistent are course outcomes, student learning experiences, and student assessments? As well as there are issues especially in courses that are prerequisites for other courses?

Viewed from the preceding principles expressed in the form of questions, the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates have thought that it is already high time to conduct curriculum revision emphasizing linguistic and research-content driven course offerings in the PhD in Applied Linguistics program. This articulation is based from the result of an observation that there has been curriculum revision being undertaken in the undergraduate English specialization in which some English major subjects are offered in the master's program or even in the doctoral (PhD) program like discourse analysis, stylistics, etc.; so, they have expressed that there is now a need to revise the PhD in Applied curriculum to make it respond to the need of the time, to make it more linguistically content-driven not just pedagogically relevant. One of these is the emphasis of research undertakings in the major subjects aside from adding courses that would strengthen graduate students theoretical and conceptual grasps.

Johnson (2001 in Alsubaie, 2016) explains that the goal of a successful educational program and thus effective curriculum development should be to meet the needs and current demands of the culture, the society, and the expectations of the population being served. For him, curriculum development and the educational reform process have to continually undergo review, revision, and constant change. He adds that curriculum development can be challenging, therefore the involvement of all stakeholders, especially individuals who are directly involved in student instruction, is a vital piece in successful curriculum development and revision. What the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates have thought of when it comes to curriculum revision is then anchored from the preceding ideas. This is definitely in line with the mission of NORSU to provide excellent instruction that responds to the changing landscape of education in this part of the world.

## **Conclusions**

Viewed from the analysis of the data pertaining to the investigation of the work relevance of PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates vis a vis NORSU's Vision, Mission, Goals and the Objectives of the program, it can now be concluded that the university's VMGOs has clearly set the career pathway of the PhD in Applied Linguistics graduates by strongly preparing them to earn holistic academic work-driven skills for them to invest their time and energy in their current work stations. Armed with these work-driven skills, they are therefore able to perform relevantly with their respective work in their respective academic organizations. Overall, the findings highlight the work relevance of the PhD in Applied Linguistics, affirming its impact on teaching, research, and professional advancement. The study suggests continuous curriculum realignment, stronger international linkages, and sustained support for scholarly dissemination to further enhance the program's relevance and responsiveness.

## **Recommendations**

Drawing from the data above, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and global responsiveness of the PhD in Applied Linguistics program at Negros Oriental State University (NORSU):

1. To ensure continued alignment with evolving academic and industry standards, the program should undergo regular curriculum evaluations. Emphasis should be placed on integrating more linguistics- and research-focused course offerings that address current theoretical advancements and practical applications in applied linguistics.
2. The university should actively pursue and expand international collaborations and partnerships. Opportunities such as academic exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and participation in global conferences can significantly boost the international profile and competitiveness of both faculty and graduates.
3. To reinforce a culture of research and academic excellence, NORSU should offer sustained institutional support for research activities. This includes providing access to funding, mentoring for scholarly writing, and assistance with publishing and presenting research at national and international venues.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

This study was conducted in full compliance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of responses was strictly maintained. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

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