UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Programme Specification for M.Sc. in
Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition
PROGRAMME SPECIFICATION FOR
M.Sc. in Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition

1. Awarding institution/body  University of Oxford
2. Teaching institution  University of Oxford
3. Programme accredited by  N/A
4. Final award  M.Sc.
5. Programme  Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition
6. UCAS code  N/A
7. Relevant subject benchmark statement  N/A
8. Date of programme specification  September 2012

9. Educational aims of the programme

- To provide students with the intellectual challenge of situating second language acquisition and language pedagogy firmly in an internationally recognised field of research, namely, Applied Linguistics.

- To develop critical analysis, problem solving skills and research skills.

- To encourage cross-fertilisation of knowledge and experience between English as a foreign language and other modern foreign languages.

- To encourage the interaction between students of language(s) and students who have, additionally, had the experience of teaching languages in a variety of educational contexts.

- To provide flexible learning routes, thereby making the above aims more realisable.

- To provide a complementary (but optional) module in English Language Teaching, for which a detailed transcript of the module and a university certificate of attendance will be provided.

- To provide a sound basis for further study in the field of SLA and Applied Linguistics and to encourage future applications for Higher Degrees leading to doctoral status.

10. Programme outcomes

Students will develop a knowledge and understanding of:

- The key theoretical principles and issues involved in the acquisition of a second language.
- The fundamental concepts, techniques, principles and theories of data collection and analysis in Applied Linguistics.
- A deep insight into how theories of second language acquisition relate to the practice of teaching in formal contexts.
A highly detailed knowledge and understanding of a particular area of second language acquisition and its role in informing the practice of language teachers.

The ethical and philosophical issues associated with research into teachers and learners of second languages.

Related teaching/learning methods and strategies

A combination of tutor presentations, small group work, student-led presentations, classroom observation (actual and/or video), project work, and individual supervisions. These different methods of programme delivery will integrate the two strands: second language acquisition analysis and methods in Applied Linguistics. An additional whole day session devoted to research methods in Applied Linguistics plus additional sessions throughout the year will be offered to support students' learning of research methods and both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Supervision meetings will enable students to identify research questions, select areas for literature review, carry out field work (if possible or applicable), and review drafts of the dissertation. Supported ICT sessions will be provided by Department staff and literature access skills (including electronic searches) will be provided by Department library staff.

Additionally, students will be able to attend any of the departmental, and Applied Linguistics Research Area seminars which are held during the course of the year in order to broaden the scope of their learning and further situate it in an educational context.

Assessment

Summative assessment will be by end of module written assignments and production of a dissertation. The assignments will assess students’ ability to discuss issues in second language acquisition using appropriate metalanguage, analyse and critique classroom practice, analyse and critique research articles both for their content and for the research methods therein, make links between theory and practice, solve problems, and draw implications for teaching in their own context (where applicable). The process and production of the dissertation will test the students’ ability to work independently, to provide a rationale for their study, to reflect on multiple sources of evidence, to use appropriate research techniques, to analyse data, and to carry through a logical and coherent argument from formulation of research question(s) to conclusion. Formative assessment will include a 1500 word assignment during Michaelmas Term, set by course tutors and commented on by the student’s supervisor. This assignment will not be formally examined. One of the assessed assignments relating to the modules in Michaelmas term will also be commented on by the student’s supervisor in terms of: appropriate academic style; appropriate referencing; quality of English in broad terms.

B. Skills and other attributes

Students will have the opportunity to develop the following skills during the course:

1. Critical analysis of both primary and secondary data
2. An ability to apply a cycle of reflective practice to their current or future teaching
3. Statistical analysis at a basic level
4. Classroom observation skills
5. Skills associated with techniques such as questionnaire design, task based self-report, think-aloud protocols
6. How to plan, conduct and report a programme of original research

II. Transferable skills

Students will learn how to:

1. Communicate effectively
2. Present information via a data projector and interactive whiteboard
3. Improve their Information and Communication Technology competence
4. Work as a member of a team
5. Manage resources and time
6. Develop autonomous learning
7. Develop critical analysis

11. Programme Structures and Features

The programme is offered on a full-time and a part-time basis. Full time students take 4 modules in their first and 4 modules in their second terms, and part-time students take two options per term over two years. The course is structured in such a way that modules are taught to groups including full and part time students, thus enabling there to be contact between experienced teachers and students wishing to enter the profession.

In addition, students will be required to attend two Saturday sessions in which they will receive an introduction to (a) the course, and (b) research methods in Second Language Acquisition (systematic observation, discourse analysis, error analysis, constructivist approaches to data analysis).

Students will also receive training in general research skills such as research design, observation skills, data collection, data analysis, research ethics, and bibliographic and computer skills.

All modules are assessed by an end of module assignment of 2,500 words. In their third term, students undertake work towards the production of a dissertation of between 15,000 and 20,000 words.

Compulsory Modules:

Brief Description of Modules

MODULE A: FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND BILINGUALISM
This module explores theories and research in First Language (L1) Acquisition and relates to issues in bilingual cognitive development and to bilingual education. The module will examine the Nativist and Empiricist positions with regard to first language acquisition. The ways in which caregivers interact with their children will be considered and the features of the Child-Directed Speech (CDS) register will be identified. There will be a consideration of possible home-school differences in linguistic experience and an examination of the problems facing researchers who wish to study the effects of input features on acquisition by the child. The potential usefulness of speech adjustments to young children will be related to reliable research findings. A range of issues in bilingual development will be discussed. For example how are young bilinguals different from monolinguals?
What is the different rate of progress in language acquisition for young bilinguals? What evidence is there for the critical period hypothesis? We will then try to situate these issues in the context of bilingual education policies and programmes.

**MODULE B: THEORIES, PROGRESSION AND METHODS**

In this module we explore the progression from beginner to advanced learner and the best teaching and learning methods to assist this development.

What is the relationship between form and function in the development of the interlanguage? We explore in some detail the developmental sequences of L2 learners (or Natural Sequences) focusing on morpheme studies (e.g. plurals; negation), on word order, on interrogatives, and on their transfer from L1. Are these developmental patterns discernable in formal learning environments? If so does that mean we can’t teach out of sequence? We will explore and compare progression in the productive skills. To what extent does progression depend on the age and psychological stages of the language learners? What implications are there for the methods that we use for teaching? Should we provide negative evidence as well as positive evidence? What is meant by negotiation of form? Should we focus on teaching grammar explicitly? Are some rules of the language we are learning more difficult than others?

**MODULE C: INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DIFFERENCES**

In this module we explore research into the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic differences to be found amongst learners. Is there such a thing as language aptitude; are learning styles immutable; what are the characteristics of age related cognitive processes; how does personality affect language acquisition; do males access and store language differently from females? We look also at a number of sociolinguistic differences: sex; social class; ethnicity; culture; and ask whether these or psycholinguistic differences have the greatest influence on SLA variables. Above all we look at attitudes and motivation as key variables in successful language learning and its relationship with learning strategies. Finally we take a brief look at international issues related to second language learning, for example the threat to minority languages, we also explore the notion of linguistic imperialism related particularly to the emergence of English as an international language.

**MODULE D: INPUT AND INTERACTION:**

This module examines the role of input and interaction and asks whether these features of classroom discourse are a sufficient explanation of second language acquisition.

We will consider the hypothesis that we can acquire a second language simply by listening to someone else speaking it. We will ask ourselves whether research suggest that the more frequent the input the more we will learn. We investigate modified input, the frequency of input and the quality of input in classrooms. We explore the modified interaction hypothesis, the negotiation of meaning (and its effect on comprehension/production) and the learner’s hypothesis testing in order to build up new mental models. What happens if a teacher’s input is made up of both the second language and the learners’ first language? We examine classroom transcripts and video-recordings in order to arrive at criteria for quality of interaction/discourse in formal instructional settings between teachers and learners and how the turn taking affects the learning. How does interaction contribute to a learner-centred classroom? What sorts of different questions are there? Can the interaction between teachers and learners create a kind of classroom culture?

**MODULE E: ACCESSING MEANING**

This module explores how second language learners access meaning. We will look first of all at the components of SL reading and listening, and consider to what extent they are “receptive”, “passive” or “interactive” language skills. This includes the role, and psycholinguistic configuration, of memory during reading and listening comprehension. What do we understand by Top-down and Bottom-up
processing and are there intermediate strategies necessary to explain text access theories? How does inner speech and phonology operate as a facilitating strategy? How is access facilitated by Schemata Theory, Cohesion, coherence and clause relation? What are the impediments to the comprehension of reading and listening texts, and how are these different for each of the two language modes? For example how significant are phoneme/grapheme problems or cultural filters at various levels of proficiency? What is the role of “threshold level knowledge” in reading and listening comprehension? What compensatory strategies do learners use, and how do such strategies function? Can learners be trained to access meaning more efficiently? What might the role of L1 be? Can learners be trained to access meaning more efficiently? What might the role of L1 be?

MODULE F: PRODUCING AND COMMUNICATING MEANING:
In this module we look at some of the fundamental principles of Communicative Language Teaching and explore their roots in linguistic theory and language learning theory. Thus functional perspectives are compared with perspectives of learning more based on form; authenticity is set against the notion purpose for learning. This discussion is set against a background of current models in spoken and written production. What are the crucial differences between communicating through the oral and the written medium? We examine the impact of communication strategies on language learning in terms of the distinction between competence and performance. We look at the effects of peer-group talk on language acquisition. We examine the role of other Pragmatic aspects of language use in the production of oral language and in communicating meaning, for example paralinguistic features, intonation, stress etc. In examining writing for a purpose we ask whether we write to communicate or whether we write to learn language. How successful is teacher feedback in improving the content and accuracy of students’ writing? We look at the role of self-monitoring strategies both as a process for improving language competence and for ensuring more accurate language production.

MODULE G: VOCABULARY ACQUISITION
This module explores the importance of vocabulary and vocabulary acquisition in the context of acquisition as a whole. The module first explores definitions of vocabulary acquisition and different classes of vocabulary. What is it to know a word? What makes a word difficult? How many words do second language learners need to know in order to understand and communicate at a variety of levels? Do second language learners see words as made up of parts or as parts of a larger structure? How is vocabulary best acquired and stored: through context; through repetition; key words; visual; graphic, semantic chunking; embedded in produced sentences or utterances? What is the role of vocabulary in syntax development? What is the role of “chunking” and collocations in the development of an L2 lexicon? Is it possible to affect the rate of vocabulary acquisition? What sort of dictionary should students use? Is specialised vocabulary something separate from language acquisition? Should we teach a separate vocabulary strand as part of a second language course?

MODULE H: ERROR ANALYSIS, INTERLANGUAGE AND TESTING
This module is concerned with the study of the language learner’s language and what such study may tell us about second language acquisition. From our present perspective, it may be difficult to appreciate the scale of the shift in thinking about language teaching and learning which accompanied the interest in learner language in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We will trace the development of studies in error analysis and interlanguage, and consider the theoretical and practical issues which have emerged. Since the study of learner language so often involves formal assessment of learners’ ability in the second or foreign language, we will also cover basic concepts in language testing such as validity, reliability and discrimination and explore the common ground between SLA research and language testing. What is the difference between slips, mistakes and errors? We examine research in both the description of errors and in the sources (or explanation) of error. What is the role of positive and negative evidence in the development of a learner’s
interlanguage? What happens in language attrition? What is the theory of “Noticing” and how does it help to explain interlanguage development? How has “Focus on Form” helped our understanding of instructed second language acquisition? What is the role of testing in language learning? What makes a good test? What can SLA research learn from the principles of good language testing?

Optional Double Module:

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Students taking the optional English Language Teaching module will be required to attend a further series of taught sessions, and a period of practical classroom observation. For native or near-native speakers of English, a period of practical teaching may also be possible.

Michaelmas Term

1. Introduction, contexts of teaching.
2. Continuing professional development
3. Approaches and methods
4. Learner autonomy
5. English for all: accessibility for learners with disabilities
6. Evaluation of print-based and electronic materials

8. Distance teaching and learning

Hilary Term

1. Grammar, spoken and written
2. Vocabulary, words and collocation, word grammar
4. Discourse analysis: features of spoken and written texts
5. Teaching speaking
6. Teaching listening
7. Teaching reading
8. Teaching writing

12. Support for students and their learning

All students have access to a wide range of resources and facilities both within the Department of Education and through the University Computing Services. The Department of Education has excellent teaching accommodation, study and social provision, a common room, workspace in the resources unit which includes IT stations, complete access to the library, and two IT suites. Wireless Internet access is available across the whole Department.

Students are encouraged to attend a wide ranging programme of research seminars given by visiting researchers throughout each term, both in the Department of Education and across the University. There are excellent opportunities for contact and work with academic staff and other graduate students. The Departmental library is open during term-time until 8.30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, until 7 p.m. on Friday and in the afternoons of the weekend. Opening hours are slightly shorter outside term-time. All course materials are posted on WebLearn, the University Virtual Learning Environment, which also provides comprehensive facilities for online communications and social networking, as well as for the online storage of electronic data.
In addition to departmental provision, students have access to the first-rate library resources of the University including the Bodleian libraries. All students are able to use the extensive IT facilities at Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS) where the Learning Technologies Group is based. This includes free attendance on the IT training courses, access to computers 8.30 a.m. to 8.30 p.m., free email and web accounts, free advisory service, and a shop selling hardware and software.

The course director has overall responsibility for the course, co-ordinating teaching, and arranging specialist supervision for dissertation writing, in collaboration with the Department’s Director of Graduate Studies. In addition, each student has a supervisor who provides academic guidance, oversees their progress and supervises work for the dissertation. Within their college, each student has a college advisor who is responsible for their general welfare and is available to assist in any problems on the academic side. There is also a general Tutor for Graduates or Senior Tutor (in graduate colleges).

There are a number of schemes at college or university level offering financial support in cases of hardship. The University runs a counselling service offering advice and support to all students.

13. Criteria for Admission

Within equal opportunities principles and legislation, applications will be assessed in the light of a candidate’s proven and potential academic excellence. Applicants will normally meet the following criteria:

1. All applicants are normally expected to be predicted or to have achieved a good Honours degree (normally 2.1 or equivalent international qualifications, such as a GPA of at least 3.6/4.0) in a relevant subject, preferably in the social sciences. Relevant work experience may be desirable. Applicants must submit full details of qualifications (transcripts, certificates or diplomas).

2. Whilst entry is highly competitive, each application is considered on an individual basis, ensuring that candidates are well-matched to their chosen course, and have the ability and potential to benefit from the course

3. Three highly positive academic references, supporting the applicant’s intellectual ability, academic achievement, motivation and ability to work in a group.

4. Two pieces of written work, which demonstrate the applicant’s understanding of the subject area, your ability to construct and defend an argument, and proficiency in academic English.

5. A convincing personal statement, explaining the reasons for applying to the programme and highlighting relevant academic and professional experience.

7. Performance at interview(s) that are normally held as part of the admissions process.

8. Applicants whose first language is not English are usually required to provide evidence of proficiency in English at the higher level required by the University;

14. Methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning

• There is an annual examination of the course and performance of students in assessments and the dissertation by a board of examiners. Examiners’ reports (both internal and external) are submitted to the Department of Education Departmental Board, the Social Sciences
Board, and the Education Committee of the University. The department is required to report steps that will be taken to address any particular issues identified. In addition, there are periodic major reviews of courses and departmental provision by the University’s Education Committee and the Social Sciences Board.

- Each course director prepares an Annual Review report for the Department’s Teaching Committee, where teaching and assessment methods are compared and improvements are identified. Any changes to the programme agreed by the department have to be reviewed and approved by the Social Sciences Board and the Education Committee.

- Annual staff appraisal, and reports on staff in their initial period of office, includes assessment of teaching. Training courses in e.g. supervision are offered by the University’s Oxford Learning Institute (OLI).

- Student feedback on the course is provided by written evaluations of the modules by all students, and by student representation on the termly meetings of the course committee. The department also has a Joint Consultative Committee where student representatives can bring suggestions and concerns to the Head of Department and other key staff.

15. Regulation of assessment

The examinations are under the supervision of the Departmental Board of the Department of Education, which, with the concurrence of the Social Sciences Board, is responsible for approving examining conventions. A Nominating Committee proposes the names of examiners for approval by the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors. It is the examiners’ responsibility to appoint appropriate assessors for any component of the examination requiring specialist expertise outwith that of the examiners.

All written assignments and the dissertation are subjected initially to blind double marking.

Examiners and assessors then compare their respective marks and the written reports and come to an agreed mark for each assignment and dissertation. When a disagreement between the two examiners cannot be resolved, a third marker will be asked to make a judgement. In certain cases, the external examiner will act as a third marker to resolve the differences. The examiners may award a distinction for excellence in the whole examination.

Internal and external examiners will be required to produce reports after the examinations for consideration by the Departmental Board, the Social Sciences Board, and the Education Committee.

External examiners act as moderators, providing informed comment on two major issues:

1. to verify that standards are appropriate to the award, in part by comparison with the standards of comparable institutions, and to ensure that the assessment procedures and the regulations governing them are fair and otherwise appropriate.

2. to ensure that the conduct of the examination and the determination of awards have been fairly conducted, and that individual student performance has been judged in accordance with the regulations and conventions of the Examining Board.

External examiners are expected to report to the Vice-Chancellor in each year in which they act. Their reports are expected to cover the following points:

- the standards demonstrated by the students
- the extent to which standards are appropriate for the award
• the design, structure, and marking of assignments
• the procedures for assessment
• whether or not external examiners have had sufficient access to, and the power to call upon, any material necessary to make the required judgments
• students’ performance in relation to their peers in comparable courses
• the coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and their consonance with the explicit roles required of them
• the basis and rationale for any comparisons made
• the strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort
• the quality of teaching and learning which may be indicated by student performance

The report is addressed to the Vice-Chancellor, and will be considered by the Social Sciences Board and the Education Committee of the University. The report will also be scrutinised by the Departmental Board of the Department of Education, by the Board of Examiners, and more widely within the department.

16. Indicators of quality and standards

The course is offered under the aegis of the Department of Education, which was rated joint first nationally in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. As part of the University’s Doctoral Training Centre, the department has an accredited ESRC training pathway (1+3 in both full-time and part-time modes), and its teacher training was considered ‘Outstanding’ by OfSTED in 2011.