

Applied Linguistics Ph.D. Exams and Defenses

The semester after finishing coursework, Ph.D. students should complete comprehensive exams and take ENGL 8900: Colloquium. The comprehensive exams in the Applied Linguistics concentration consist of 4 parts: 3 written exams and one oral exam. Upon completion of the Comps, students must write and defend a prospectus for their dissertation project. The prospectus defense is the last formal step until the defense of the full dissertation.

COMP 1

The objective of this exam is to demonstrate that you have broad knowledge of concepts in a subfield of linguistics and should provide an overview of theories, researchers, and foundational works. You should discuss influential concepts, including who developed them and how later researchers have expanded on or challenged them. Extensive citations are not needed, although you should be able to name the researchers who developed the theories and concepts you are discussing. It is not necessary, however, to memorize long lists of bibliographic citations.

This exam is usually 10 – 12 pages long. It should be completed and sent to all members of the committee within 4 hours.

Sample questions:

- Discuss the role of identity and agency in second language learning. Why are these concepts important to understand adult language learning?
- Discuss first language acquisition in children. Consider the major theories of language acquisition, the critical period for language acquisition, and the consequences of not acquiring a language during this time. Which theory or theories do you think best inform teachers and why?
- What is discourse analysis and how does it fit into the field of applied linguistics? Explain the subfield of Critical Discourse analysis – its purpose, potential applications, and importance within applied linguistics?
- Recent years have seen an exponentially growing exploration of communication practices in digital media. Provide an overview of the research on computer-mediated communication/digital discourse, including how the field developed and where it has gone. How does digitally-mediated communication differ from other communicative settings (e.g. face-to-face interaction)? Where do you see the field going from here?

COMP 2

A second four-hour written exam allows you to demonstrate that you have enough background / reading knowledge to qualify you to teach upper division and graduate

courses in your area of specialization. This area will be determined by you in conjunction with your advisor and members of the committee. While the first exam assesses broad knowledge of the field, the second exam asks that you demonstrate how you would *apply* your knowledge. How might your topic be relevant to a specific group? What aspects are most important and why? Do you have recommendations for how this knowledge might be applied in the classroom or community?

The exam is usually 10 – 12 pages long. It should be completed within 4 hours and then sent to all members of the committee.

Sample questions:

- What is corpus linguistics? What contributions has it made to ESL teaching currently and what are its possibilities for informing second language learning and teaching in the future? What are its weaknesses and advantages as applied to ESL teaching/learning? How might you use corpus linguistics in your own teaching?
- There is a growing trend in ESL teaching to incorporate social aspects of communication into instruction (e.g. contextual meaning & pragmatics, cross-cultural assumptions and expectations, etc.). Explain issues and concerns with incorporating intercultural communication in the classroom, and how you as a teacher might address the challenges of teaching intercultural communication in your classes.
- Discuss the role Critical Discourse Analysis might play in evaluating the language of medical communication. Imagine you are applying for funding for a research study on medical interaction. Explain the impact of your research on future communicative practice. How will you convince the grant committee that your study will have a positive impact on medical practice?

COMP 3

This written take-home exam will demonstrate your knowledge of your proposed dissertation area. The objective of this exam is for you to show that you have the ability to write a sophisticated essay that can be developed into the literature review of your prospective dissertation area.

Sample questions:

- Define cognitive and constructionist learning theories and mention important scholars associated with each theory. Describe differences and similarities and how each theory might be applied in formulating approaches to ESL writing instruction.
- In recent years the notion of learner needs assessment has gained increased attention in the study of adult English language learning. Review the research on learner needs and needs assessment to consider a) how addressing learner needs in

curriculum design and lesson planning facilitates student learning, and b) how learners' identities (as sojourners, refugees, immigrants, etc. intersect with their needs in the classroom. In short, why should second language learning incorporate learners' needs?

- Digital environments allow people from around the globe to communicate with one another, representing a wide array of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. In a well-developed essay, explain how cultural expectations and assumptions emerge in digitally-mediated communication. How do people negotiate/resolve different interpretations of communicative intent? What variables (e.g. gender, ethnicity, etc.) are important?

This exam should include at least 20 -25 citations, and should be completed and sent to all members of the committee within 7 days.

ORALS

After the written exams have been completed and graded, there will be a two-hour oral exam based upon the written exams. The oral exam allows the committee members to give feedback on the dissertation project, and may include recommendations from the committee about refining the methodology and/or theoretical approaches/frameworks.

In the oral comps, you should plan to outline your project to the members of your committee so that they can give you feedback on methodology, data, gaps in the literature review or methodological/theoretical approach, and/or address any concerns that came up during the written comps.

You' will have already done a preliminary review of the literature (Comp 3); in the oral comp you should present a plan for your research to the committee that includes that literature review PLUS:

1. the methodological approach you'll be taking,
2. the data you'll be using,
3. how you'll collect the data,
4. what problems you anticipate (with data collection or otherwise),
5. whether you'll need IRB approval, and
6. how you plan to address any potential problems (i.e. what would your 'Plan B' look like?).

You'll also want to include any issues you're having with narrowing or classifying data or terms/concepts and any issues you anticipate with IRB approval (if needed).

The orals committee will assess your plan and give you feedback on any difficulties they can identify where adjustments are needed (e.g. your methodology won't work so it will need to be adjusted, the data you're planning to collect isn't appropriate for answering your research questions, you've overlooked a body of research in your lit review, etc.)

To prepare, you should meet with your advisor to design your dissertation research and draft a preliminary plan for how you will collect and analyze your data.

PROSPECTUS

After you've gotten feedback from the committee about your research plan (in the oral comp), the next step is to write and defend your prospectus. This should be a well-written expansion of what you proposed in your orals, and will be the basis for the first 3 chapters of your dissertation. It includes much of the same information as the orals presentation, but it's in written form and is expanded and polished.

LOGISTICS

A student who fails one section of the comprehensive examination will be given one opportunity no later than the following semester to retake that section. A student who fails more than one section of the exam will be given an opportunity to take a different exam (with all new questions) no later than the following semester. A student who fails the second comprehensive exam will be dismissed from the program.

As you prepare, it is often helpful to meet with your committee chair and work with that person to compile a reading list or sources you should read and a timeline for completing tasks.

As a rule, you will not proceed to the next comp exam until the prior one has received a passing grade from the committee members. While completing all 4 comprehensive exams and defending the prospectus within a single semester is ideal, because of a variety of obligations and constraints on the committee members (who will need time to read and evaluate each exam) this is not always possible. In such cases, students will work with their advisors to adjust the timeline accordingly.