

The master of arts in applied linguistics graduates' perceptions on the program and their competencies

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ABSTRACT

This study determined and analyzed the graduates' evaluation of the master of arts in applied linguistics program on their perspectives on the contribution of the program to the present work demands, competencies in their work to further advance career and program enhancement. This study used the quantitative-qualitative research methods by using the modified self-administered questionnaires based on Schomburg primarily and interviews. The data revealed that the graduates perceived the relevance, appropriateness, and satisfaction of their program to their work. The graduates were also trained in terms of writing and presenting reports, critical thinking, managing their time and publishing. However, the program needed to enhance the skills in publication which could be attributed to the lack of internal motivation to publish one's research output and availability of journals for publication. Thus, this study implies that there is a need to strengthen the research agenda of the department. It is indeed recommended that the students should be required by faculty members to submit their final papers for review and publication to a selected journal and publishing the master's theses before and after earning the master of arts in applied linguistics (MAAL) program should be encouraged, reinforced, and practiced. A scholarly journal could also be created.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The department of communications, linguistics and literature (DCLL) which was formerly known as the department of languages and literature (DOLL) has offered the master of arts in applied linguistics (MAAL) degree program starting April 2002. The old program which was master of arts in English language teaching was replaced with the MAAL program to give way to the college of education's offering of master of education major in English language teaching (M.Ed. ELT). For more than a decade, the master of arts in applied linguistics degree is a definite option as a master's degree of the baccalaureate graduates of the same department and other English majors across the Visayas and Mindanao regions. There were also foreign students who enrolled in the program from the United States of America, Canada, and China. Even non-English majors have been enjoined to take the program as there are options to take additional linguistics courses to address their deficiency and proceed with the MAAL degree.

Since the MAAL program has run for more than a decade from the first graduates of the program in October 2005 until March 2015, there has been very few information and updates as to where these graduates

are currently employed. To date, there has been no official record in the department on the current whereabouts of the graduates, the graduates' evaluations of the program in a three-year period and onwards after earning their degree, and their suggestions to further improve the MAAL program of the department. Because of this situation, the researchers found this study timely, relevant and significant. Hence, there is a need to determine and analyze the evaluation of the graduates of the MAAL program on the graduates' perceptions on the relevance, appropriateness, satisfaction of the said program and the graduates' competencies including their suggestions in enriching the program which would also be responsive to the needs of the industry and academe.

This graduate tracer study (GTS) of the master of arts in applied linguistics basically follows the guidelines in "Carrying Out Tracer Studies: Guide to Anticipating in Matching Skills and Jobs Volume 6" as most tracer studies across the globe follow this construct and principles in conducting research in graduate tracer studies [1]. Members of European Union nations would want to emphasize on "skills anticipation and better matching" of the next generation graduates who would recognize that these anticipation and matching approaches and methods should develop a skilled workforce with the right mix of skills responsive to the labor market needs that promotes job quality and lifelong learning. There have been studies conducted concerning tracer studies and competencies for the past five years. However, there has been a dearth of studies in the Philippine setting. Competencies refer to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes including other characteristics that enable a person to skillfully perform [2]. Aligned with these definitions, the competencies refer to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the graduates.

First, a bibliometric analysis on the alignment of curriculum specifically on the learned and acquired skills was conducted with the purpose of examining the scientific discussion and themes of the Scopus indexed-journals [3]. Results demonstrated that the Philippines did not belong to the top 10 published countries consisting of articles on curriculum alignment. The predominant themes include entrepreneurship education. The employability of graduates provides implication on the excellent education and relevant preparation the alumni obtained from their degree programs [4].

Second, a study looked into university graduates of Widyatama University for the tracer study with 384 respondents who answered the survey questionnaires and participated in the face-to-face and telephone interviews [5]. The findings revealed that the alumni competencies that are considered are computer skills, leadership, integrity, loyalty, adaptability, analytical skills. In addition, the competencies which needed improvement are general knowledge, Internet skills, critical thinking, research skills, negotiation skills, initiatives, and English language skills.

Third, another study was conducted to determine the user satisfaction of the graduates [6]. Through secondary analysis in using the e-tracer study system, the findings showed that the users consider the graduates as moderately competent which implied that the university graduates' quality were aligned with the expectations and perceptions with the following eight indicators: implementation of Islamic values, integrity ethics and morals, expertise based on knowledge, foreign language skills, ability to use information communications technology (ICT), communication, teamwork, and self-development.

Fourth, the nursing graduates' competency who had professional practice during their first year were also investigated [7]. The study used the descriptive, cross-sectional method with 215 newly-graduated registered nurses. Results manifest that critical thinking and research aptitude could benefit the newly-registered nurses.

The fifth study created a generic competency model. The model was based on the entry-level's requirements in trading companies in Czech Republic. There were 419 companies that participated in this study [8]. Results of the study showed the ideal competent graduates of entry-level positions in trading had to be independent, exceptionally communicative worker, self-motivated to personal development, solve problems effectively and interact with the colleagues positively.

Another research study was conducted in Malaysia among internship students of tourism if they have the necessary language competencies and whether these needs are aligned with what the industry needs [9]. The findings of the study showed that the language competency needed are tailored according to the kind of job they were exposed to, and that is in the tourism industry as tourism student interns or trainees. In their case, the four macro skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening were still considered vital. However, speaking is considered as the most important. Writing, in this case, note-taking, is also needed in front desk/receptionist jobs when asked about tour packages and transportation bookings. They also needed to boost their self-confidence and be exposed to the different English language accents all over the world. Hence, they suggested that these findings be included when they revise or modify their syllabus.

The commission of higher education (CHED) as espoused in CHED memorandum order (CMO) 24 English language studies graduates (undergraduate) are expressed to have the following outcomes: i) Articulate and discuss the latest developments in the specific field of practice; ii) Effectively communicate orally and in writing using both English and Filipino; iii) Work effectively and independently in multi-

disciplinary and multi-cultural teams; iv) Act in recognition of professional, social, and ethical responsibility; and v) Preserve and promote "Filipino historical and cultural heritage" (based on RA 7722) [10].

With importance on writing and critical thinking skills, some studies provided supporting evidence. The research writing would be made manageable when the writing task would be broken into smaller task [11]. As a result, research writing would reduce the negative feeling towards writing which is one of the needed competencies of writers whether in school or already at work. They examined the positive and negative emotions towards the various writing tasks with 25 Education students studying in a private institution in Manila by letting them write their reflective logs in four different writing tasks. Writing is also considered as a special contribution to the way people think [12]. Graduates who are now employees or working should have the ability to effectively communicate with their employers and clients [12].

In sum, these competencies are essential to the graduates whose disciplines are in language studies and humanities such as applied linguistics. Moreover, the present English language teaching and learning aims to produce graduates who are communicatively competent with five essential components such as the learning process, effective language use, macro-skills relationship, and holistic assessment [13]. These components are necessary to communicate effectively.

Various studies also provided implications of the skills of graduates that are helpful in their employment. First, the skills of the civil engineers were determined [14]. Using the online questionnaires distributed to students, alumni and professors, results illustrate that these skills include transferable skills, presentations, time management skill, effective teamwork and meetings. Effective communication and teamwork are also helpful to professors. On the contrary, this present study only focused on the alumni.

Moreover, a cross-sectional survey research method was used in bridging the gap of opportunity entrepreneurship and leadership among the female and male groups [15]. It was found that female groups were the same with the male counterparts except for the males' higher level of self-efficacy in the initiation of investor relationships. Hence, female participants also have leadership skills which were found to be contradicting against the previous studies on leadership skills.

Furthermore, there were also studies conducted concerning the relevance of the programs to the labor market. First, a study was done to examine the awareness and relevance of infopreneurship among 160 Library and Information Students (LIS) at Prince Abubakar Audu University [16]. With the use of the survey questionnaires with the 52% of returned instruments, the findings highlighted that the students were engaged in infopreneurship in order to have extra income. The students were also skillful in ICT which were helpful in their performance in entrepreneurship. Although college students were not able to complete the said program, they were already able to apply their knowledge and skills in getting income related to the real world of work.

The second study conducted was about the in Nigeria, the researchers discussed and reviewed the relevance of library science (i.e., librarianship) program in the Nigerian and global context [17]. The proponents concluded that the curriculum needs upgrade through digitized library and resources with the use of information communication technology and the librarians' central role in the higher education and department's accreditation of programs. In this manner, the relevance and alignment of curriculum and profession are evident in this discussion.

Third, a paper explored themes in applied linguistics in local and global contexts [18]. Out of 19 reviewed articles, 17 articles focused on the English language as object of the study specifically on the area of language teaching and learning. In relation to the skills, awareness and critical abilities which play important roles in research.

Concerning employability of graduates and students, studies were also conducted to align the competencies with the needs of the labor market [19]. First, the sex differences were investigated whether these could be good influencing factors for the self-perceived employability (SPE) based on the motivated strategies for learning (MSL) [20]. With the 600 freshmen students from Poland, results revealed that a higher level of internal self-perceived employability was evident among the Polish men (Poles) compared to their women counterparts. However, the female students ranked higher in regard to the motivated strategies for learning, self-regulation and intrinsic values. Thus, the motivated strategies for learning were found to be a good predictor of self-perceived employability in both males and females. Lastly, a study in Malaysia identified and analyzed the focus and strategies of public universities to enhance the competencies of their graduates and suggested ways in increasing employment [21]. With the qualitative research method used by interviewing eight expert informants, results displayed the thorough explanations and practical roles of the aforementioned universities. Their strategies result in enhancing the graduates' level of competencies and employability through the strengthened university-industry collaboration. Among the reviewed studies, competencies presented and discussed emphasized much attention on the skills and many of the studies highlighted the skills of the graduates in other disciplines and abroad. There is a dearth of studies on the competencies of the field in applied linguistics and English language studies in the Philippines.

So, this present study attempted to fill this research gap in order to improve the present program of the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics and to address the needed competencies of the graduates. In this way, the activities and requirements of the program would be aligned with the needed competencies of the graduates who are now employed. This present study would also shed light and solve problems on the curriculum developers and administrators in improving their curricular offerings that are tailored with the needs of the practitioners and employment in the local and international higher educational institutions. The organization of this study involves the graduates' perceptions on the relevance and appropriateness of the program to work and satisfaction of the graduates, and competencies needed to further advance their graduate competencies are and lastly, the comments and suggestions of the graduate-participants about the MAAL program as basis in revising the present MAAL program are presented.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study was both quantitative, which reflects the frequency counts and tabular presentations of the results, and qualitative, which evaluates the responses of the participants. A modified self-administered graduate tracer study was prepared. This study involved all 21 graduates of the program, which covered from the start of the opening of the program April 2002 (Summer term) until March 2017 to maximize representation provided by the limitation of time in collecting data and getting responses for this study. The study used the frequency and distribution tables on the results of the data to help analyze the data statistically, and the significance or variance of the results. The participants of this study were those who returned their answered questionnaires and responded to the interview questions in person, by email or Facebook messenger. As shown in Table 1, there were 17 participants responded with answers and interviews among the 21 graduates.

So, this study is focused on the 17 graduates of the program and this result is marked by an 85.71% response rate of the master of arts in applied linguistics graduate tracer studies (MAAL GTS). Obtaining 50% or higher is such an achievement in conducting tracer studies. The key factors in retrieving higher response rate are the proximity and willingness of the graduate-participants who were themselves teaching in the University of San Carlos in the undergraduate and graduate programs, and constant communication and networking capabilities among graduate students in the university. Supplemental data were also provided by teachers of the MAAL program who were not MAAL graduates and a foreign graduate of applied linguistics and English as a second language (ESL) from Buckingham University in United Kingdom who was teaching in South Korea provided suggestions for the improvement of the present MAAL program.

For ethical considerations, consent was sought through the cover letter in the survey questionnaires. The participation was voluntary and the data gathered were taken with confidentiality when the names of the participants were anonymously written in the paper. For security purposes, all gathered questionnaires and recorded interviews were kept in a folder where only the researchers could locate. Ethics were observed in the conduct of this research.

Table 1. Participants of the GTS questionnaire and interviews

Participants	GTS questionnaires (N=17)	Interviews (N=17)
MAAL graduates (N=21)	17	10
MAAL graduates Who are teaching MAAL program	7	7
MAAL teachers who are not MAAL graduates	Not applicable	8

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides graduates' perceptions on the relevance and appropriateness of the MAAL program, satisfaction and skills and competencies of the graduates. Comments and suggestions were also determined for the upgrading and/or revision of the program. There are three sub-sections of the graduates' perceptions such as the relevance and appropriateness of work, and satisfaction.

3.1. Graduates' perceptions on the MAAL program

3.1.1. Relevance and appropriateness of work

Since the graduates were equipped with the necessary training and skills while they were studying, they found their work very related to their MAAL degree. The majority of graduates affirmed that the job position is appropriate to their qualifications. This implies that what they had learned in the learning

institution (USC) was surely applied in their workplace. Hence, the said university prepared these graduates to actual work.

3.1.2. Satisfaction

The MAAL graduates’ level of satisfaction validates the previous data specifically on their Expertise (content) in the field of applied linguistics, opportunity to grow professionally and application of what had been learned in the MAAL program. This demonstrates an affirmation of the well-designed program in master of arts in applied linguistics. The data reveal how satisfied they are in the MAAL program they completed. Hence, the relevance of the program could contribute to the satisfaction of the graduates since they find their program useful in their job. Universities as service providers shall produce quality graduates who are aligned with the needs of the employers or industries. To validate the results, these are the evaluations of the graduates in terms of the relevance, appropriateness, and satisfaction of the program to their work:

“I would say all of them especially the major ones. The knowledge I have learned from these courses has given me so much advantage in teaching.” (G17)

In extract 1, G17 considered her major courses as very relevant to the teaching career, especially in teaching English and Linguistics to her teaching practice.

“To be honest, MAAL is still relevant especially here in South Korea. The name has a global appeal. In fact, many universities such as University of Birmingham in UK and Indiana State University in US are still offering MAAL.” (G18)

Extract 2 demonstrates G18’s perception on the relevance of the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics program very relevant in her teaching profession in South Korea when she taught English as a Second Language and English for Specific Purposes.

“All courses are essential and should be retained in the program.” (G9)

For extract 3, G9 considered all courses taken to be very important. Thus, these courses were appropriate and relevant to the present career.

“All of the courses are helpful....” (G3)

Similar to G9, extract 4 demonstrates how helpful the courses of the MAAL program were as pointed out by G3. Hence, graduates found the MAAL program relevant and appropriate to their present work. Table 2(a), (b), (c) demonstrates the graduates’ perceptions on the MAAL Program specifically on the relevance and appropriateness, and satisfaction of the curricular courses of the said program.

Table 2. Perceptions of graduates on the (a) relatedness, (b) appropriateness, and (c) satisfaction of the curricular courses N=21

(a)			(b)		
Relevance of work to MAAL Degree	F	%	Is the job position appropriate to qualification?	F	%
Very related	11	65	Yes	15	88
Slightly related	6	35	No	2	12
Not related	0	0	Total	17	100
Total	17	100			

Indicators	(c)				Total
	Very high	Satisfactory	Not satisfactory	Undecided	
1. Content of work and professional tasks	9	8	0	0	17
2. Working atmosphere or environment	6	9	1	1	17
3. Possibility to use qualifications acquired during studies	8	7	1	1	17
4. Amount of income	5	9	2	1	17
5. Prospects of promotion	4	9	2	2	17
6. Chance to obtain further professional qualification	8	7	0	2	17
7. Professional position achieved	6	9	1	1	17

3.2. Competencies

In this study, competencies refer to the skills, competencies and values included in the design of master of arts in applied linguistics' graduates. Their assessment shows very good in most of the indicators. This implies that graduates were trained in terms of writing and presenting reports, critical thinking, managing their time and publishing. This study also affirmed the need to cultivate and improve the English language exposure and relevant communication skills of the Tourism student-interns needed for their future jobs.

Most of these competencies are evident in the MAAL graduates. The written and oral communication specifically the written report making and oral report presentation are fundamental competencies that are very important in the workplace. This could be attributed to the English proficiency of Filipino graduate students compared to Malaysian graduates. In fact, employers prioritize graduates who have practical competencies and 21st century skills, namely, problem solving and communication [22]. The data on Table 3 shows the competencies of the MAAL graduates that are helpful in their workplaces.

Table 3. Evident competencies N=17 their competencies in MAAL program that helped them at work

Indicators	Very good	Good	Poor	Undecided	Total
1. Written report making	12	4	1	0	17
2. Oral report presentation	15	1	1	0	17
3. Time management skills	9	7	0	1	17
4. Publishing a paper or research work	7	7	2	1	17
5. Testing or grading skills	7	8	0	2	17
6. Critical thinking skills	13	3	0	1	17
7. Advising	11	5	0	1	17
8. Others	0	0	0	0	0

3.3. Competencies that need improvement

These weaknesses could be attributed to lack of internal motivation to publish one's research output, less exposure to ESL in a multicultural setting and absence of Human relations/leadership in the curriculum. A level of competence and skills essential for the conduct of research are important criterion of success in the future professional activity of a financial and administrative specialist [23]. This level is also relevant to the professionals with the master of arts in applied linguistics who are now administrators, faculty and researchers.

The influence of internal motivation in an individual's needs and desires has a strong impact on the behavior [24]. This could also be because of the rarity of journals available for the students/graduates in the university. In the present, only three scholarly journals are available in the university such as The Philippine Scientist for Pure Sciences, Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society (PQCS) for Humanities and Social Sciences and Devotio: Journal of Business and Economic Studies for the School of Business and Economics. Hence, there is a need to add more scholarly journals for the graduate students and faculty to motivate them to publish their manuscripts from final papers and research projects.

To illustrate, one participant (G18) suggested to include curriculum development and material design in the program, and another participant (G1) on language curriculum review and planning, and language policymaking. It has been reported that recent work has been initiated to investigate the weaknesses of the programs to respond with innovative curricula.

"More curriculum development and materials design due to the special English class offerings."
(G18)

In extract 5, G18 emphasized the need for curriculum development and materials design to be included in the revision of the curriculum. Since, this is not an education program, there could be an integration of the curriculum development and materials design in any of the courses in English such as the methodologies in teaching and Teaching as a Second Language. Table 4 illustrates the weaknesses of the MAAL program. The weaknesses include research/publication, communication/teaching ESL dynamics in a multicultural setting, and human relations/leadership.

Table 4. Competencies that need improvement (N=17)

Categories of areas MAAL graduates are weak at	f	Rank
1. Research/publication	6	1
2. Communication/teaching ESL dynamics in a multicultural setting	3	2
3. Human relations/leadership	3	2
4. Language planning/review/policy making	2	3
5. Materials design/curriculum development	2	3
6. Use of software/technology	2	3
7. Practical application to teaching/teaching young learners	2	3
8. In depth discussion on particular courses	1	4
9. Translation skills	1	4

3.4. Comments and suggestions for the program improvement

The majority of the comments and suggestions highlighted the curriculum specifically on the research publication and exposure, on student services and pool of faculty. This result implies that there is a need to strengthen the research program of the department specifically in publishing research outputs of students during their coursework. It also implies that courses suggested by the graduates during the interview and survey questionnaire could be integrated in the curriculum to align the needs of graduates in the industry/academe and the MAAL program. Students' level of self-efficacy increases when they are valued and acknowledged [25]. This could be in the same manner with the alumni whose suggestions for the improvement of the curriculum matter.

Students' capabilities in conducting research should be strengthened. Research is already integrated with learning. Graduate students had to be ensured that they could be potential authors and see the course papers as possible future scholarly articles [26]. A number of participants suggested that students should present their papers in international conferences and publish their research papers before graduation. These are the suggestions:

“Require on-going MAAL students to present papers in international conferences and publish their papers in journals before graduation....” (G2)

Extract 6 illustrates the need for the graduate students to be exposed to paper presentations and publications prior to graduation as pointed out by G2. This suggestion is indeed very relevant especially nowadays that the commission of higher education (CHED) has been crafting requirements of published paper for graduate students before getting their diploma.

“Put emphasis on quantitative researches in Applied Linguistics.... Include contemporary stylistics in the courses....” (G13)

In extract 7, G13 emphasized the inclusion of quantitative researches and stylistics in the revision of the program to let the graduate students be exposed to statistics and stylistics and be able to apply these suggested courses in their actual teaching practice.

“I suggest that the department strengthen the area of research and publication.” (G1)

G1 in extract 8 suggested to strengthen the area of research and publication in the department where the MAAL was offered. This implies that faculty members would also be empowered to do research projects and publish their work. As a result, they will be able to impart their research and publishing skills to their students. Table 5 presents the comments and suggestions for the improvement of the MAAL program.

Table 5. Comments and suggestions for the improvement of the program

Categories	F
1. Research presentation/exposure include topics to existing course/s for improvement include courses not in current MAAL program qualify for a certification in teaching English	13
2. On student services	3
3. On teaching pool	2
4. Relevance of the program	1
5. Offer PhD program related to MAAL	1

4. CONCLUSION

The graduates are employable in any workplace, local or abroad since they are equipped with the necessary competencies involving knowledge and skills in terms of writing and presenting reports, critical thinking, managing their time and publishing prepared them for their present jobs. On the contrary, the data revealed that the program had to enhance the skills in publication which could be attributed to lack of internal motivation to publish one's research output and availability of journals where they could publish their research outputs in the university. Raising expectations on the development of professional competencies among students and in employing pedagogical approaches and educational practices that encourage the students to become independent, self-directed and self-reliant might have a significant impact in developing the twenty-first century competencies. Hence, there is a need to regularly evaluate the curriculum through getting the perceptions of the graduates and even with the feedback of their employers to match the competencies needed at work and the curriculum developers will find ways on how to adapt the present curriculum in the rapidly changing world.




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