

## The Landscape of Applied Linguistics Research: A Decade of Themes

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Research Paper

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**Abstract:** The instability and interdisciplinarity of applied linguistics have led to the divergence of themes explored in research articles, resulting in many studies on applied linguistics research themes. However, there are still gaps, including selecting unrepresentative corpora and analyzing research articles published years ago. This diachronic corpus-based study attempted to randomly select 3000 original research articles published from 2012 to 2022 in 20 top-tier journals and analyze them using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. The findings demonstrated that well-established areas within the field, such as *Second Language Acquisition (SLA)*, *Language Testing*, and *sociolinguistics*, were predominant, whereas critical- and technological-oriented areas received limited attention. Novel interdisciplinary themes, such as neurolinguistics, also emerged. It was also found that each main theme included various sub-themes; for example, SLA embodied sub-themes such as *Learner Identity* and *Learner Motivation*, and these sub-themes themselves included sub-categories. The findings illuminate the need for educational policymakers to widen the scope of applied linguistics research. Likewise, in order to cater for the students' needs and foster a more inclusive educational environment, teachers and materials developers need to incorporate a wide variety of diverse, critical, and neglected themes in their instructional resources, materials, and lesson plans.

**Keywords:** Critical Applied Linguistics, Research Articles, Research Themes, SLA, Thematic Analysis

### Introduction

Originating at around the year 1948, applied linguistics has always been a central concern of researchers and has received various definitions and interpretations (Adelian et al., 2024; Arabmofrad et al., 2023; Kaplan, 2010; Sadeghian Sourki, 2023). In the 1950s, it was mainly interpreted as a reflection of those aspects of structural and functional linguistics that could be applied to second language teaching (Kaplan, 2002). The application of linguistics to language teaching continued to be the main concern of the field in the 1960s (Corder, 1973; Halliday et al., 1964). In the 1970s, although language teaching was still the central focus of the discipline, its scope was broadened more to include real-world language-related issues as well. This included the addition and expansion of subfields of language assessment, language-minority rights, language teacher training, and language policy and planning (Widdowson, 1979).

The focus on real-world issues continued in the 1980s, when areas such as bilingualism and multilingualism, corpus linguistics, translation, and lexicography were explored (Grabe & Kaplan, 1991). The 1990s and the 2000s tended to be different from previous decades in the sense that the use of other disciplines increased notably in these two decades. The 1990s witnessed the incorporation of different subfields as well as the employment of other disciplines, such as political sciences, policy analysis,

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psychology, sociology, and rhetoric, to address real-world problems, rather than focusing merely on theoretical issues (Stevens, 1993). This trend continued in the 2000s and applied linguistics drew on various supporting disciplines including literary stylistics, information design, and lexicography (Cook, 2003). As Wei's (2014) argument that applied linguists have taken significant advisory positions in governmental and inter-governmental entities shows, the field is still increasingly expanding.

The rapid expansion of applied linguistics has led to an increasing variation in the themes explored in research studies. Research themes are the main idea(s) of research studies that capture salient aspects of data in a patterned way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They are treated as abstract ideas tacitly understood and much larger and more inclusive than one word (Patton, 1990). The interconnectedness of factors influencing the field – such as sociopolitical and philosophical ones – and their rapid change, which is accelerated by growing developments in technology, are other factors leading to diversity in research themes of the field. Mapping out a clear and up-to-date picture of research themes in applied linguistics, therefore, can help researchers get familiar with the dominant social, cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical thinking in the field and make appropriate choices in their research interests.

In spite of the wide range of studies in this regard, there still exist some gaps. For example, previous studies have focused on a limited or outdated corpus, which do not seem to be representative of the current themes and trends. Moreover, some studies have mainly stressed on the dominant themes thus overshadowing the emerging areas. To address these gaps, this study aimed to examine research themes of applied linguistics journal articles published from 2012 to 2022. This was to provide a comprehensive image of the evolving landscape of research in the field and enhance the field's discourse through identifying previously-neglected themes such as the critical- and technological-oriented ones. The critical rationale behind this study, therefore, was to address the mentioned gaps in applied linguistics research through providing an up-to-date thematic analysis of applied linguistics research themes which can yield a more holistic understanding of the field and help to engage with diverse and emerging themes.

## Literature Review

This section attempts to provide the theoretical and empirical background of the study.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Research Themes in Applied Linguistics

Applied linguistics, as a dynamic and dynamically expanding discipline, represents the diverse facets of language use in various settings (Tomitch & Sliveria, 2020). In recent decade, various sociological, political, and technological concerns have influenced the field, resulting in a wide range of research themes explored by applied linguistics research (Liu & Hu, 2024). Being familiar with these themes is necessary for researchers to be able to identify research shifts as well as the evolving research priorities so that emerging issues and interdisciplinary approaches are adequately addressed. A prominent way for getting informed about applied linguistics research themes has been thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021).

Thematic analysis has become increasingly recognized as a valuable tool in research. Having appeared in about 40 years ago (Clarke & Braun, 2013), it is a kind of qualitative method for the analysis of qualitative data to find recurrent themes in a corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this regard, thematic analysis moves further than mere word or phrase counting by emphasizing the identification and description of both implicit and explicit concepts and codes (Namey et al., 2008). It involves the development of codes to represent ideas or themes, which are then used for subsequent analysis. This analysis may encompass tasks such as comparing the relative frequencies of themes or topics within a dataset, examining code cooccurrence, or graphically depicting code relationships. Hence, the organization of a data set into themes forms the core of thematic analysis, and quantitative techniques may be used in accordance with the purposes of a research study.

## Empirical Evidence on Research Themes in Applied Linguistics

Many studies have thematically analyzed journal articles of applied linguistics and/or its sub-fields. For instance, Pennycook (2010) reviewed publications on the critical and alternative dimensions of applied linguistics. He reported that critical studies on different areas of the field as well as the employment of different social theories have led to a new theme in applied linguistics: an evolution of the initial emphasis on language teaching, testing, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) into a more expansive and critically-oriented conceptualization of language within the context of social life. He believed that the field needed this shift since it relates applied linguistics to social and political concerns, which influence all kinds of human relationships. Also, he argued that some new trends in the field – such as metrolingualism, the ways in which individuals from diverse backgrounds engage in the use, manipulation, and negotiation of identities (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) – are a result of this shift.

Some studies have analyzed research themes and trends in applied linguistics and its sub-fields across countries. Rubino (2010), for instance, studied current and future themes and trends of research on immigrant languages in Australia from a structural, socio-cultural, and socio-psychological perspective. He identified emerging trends in research, particularly the need to adapt to the changing linguistic landscape in Australia. In other words, he reported that it is essential to foster new research developments in order to adequately address the evolving linguistic landscape of Australia resulting from the heightened fluidity and mobility of contemporary migration. He further stated that such research would contribute to a better appreciation of the cultural and linguistic differences in Australia and could lead to movements against monolingualism in this country. In another study in the context of New Zealand, Ker et al. (2013) reviewed research themes in applied linguistics from 2006 to 2010. They reported that the major research themes in applied linguistics research in New Zealand included *SLA, curriculum, language teaching methodology, and teacher education and cognition*.

Some studies have focused on certain areas of applied linguistics. For instance, Hyland and Jiang (2021) explored research studies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) from 1980 to 2020. They found that themes associated with teaching, learning, and classroom issues were the most popular ones over these forty years. They further argued that after 2001, a considerable portion of introduced topics has centered around exploring contexts, discourses, and implications associated with these practices. Significant emphasis has been placed on matters pertaining to identity, interaction, and genre. In other words, since 2001, real-world issues have been considered as well. Similarly, in a co-citation analysis of 1092 articles on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and their 25,147 unique references, Liu and Hu (2021, p. 97) found three evolutionary stages in the field:

The initial conceptualizing stage (1970s–1990s) centering on needs analysis, the maturing stage (1990s–2000s) characterized by the development of major methodological approaches (e.g., genre-based, corpus-based, contextual, and critical approaches), and the flourishing stage (2000s-) ushering in a diversity of research interests (e.g., move analysis, cross-disciplinary and cross-linguistic variation, lexical bundles, vocabulary lists, metadiscourse, and academic writing in a global context).

### This Study

As the above review of the related literature demonstrates, previous studies have investigated applied linguistics from various (sometimes overlapping) perspectives including political (Benson, 2017; Chun, 2022), critical (Mann, 2011; McNamara, 2015; Pennycook, 2010a,b, 2017), social and cultural (Block, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Lantolf, 2002), and discursive (Baldauf & Kaplan, 2010; Gunnarsson, 1997; Pica, 2003; Poole & Samraj, 2010; Shuy, 2015). A major concern of the last group has been the analysis of the discourse of different sections and dimensions of research articles, including research themes (Estaji et al., 2015; Estaji & Vafaeimehr, 2015; Hall et al., 2017; Lazaeaton, 2000; Lin, 2014; Rezaei et al., 2015;

Richards, 2009; Rubino, 2010; Talmy, 2010). These studies have been conducted partly as a response to the instability inherent in the field. Due to interrelated academic, sociocultural, political, and philosophical factors, instability is in the nature of every academic field, including applied linguistics (Seidlhofer, 2003). The instability may also be a result of the wide range of topics the field covers (De Bot, 2015). This may lead those concerned with applied linguistics to sometimes miss the destinations and objectives of the field. To address this problem, many studies have been done to map out a clear picture of the themes covered by research studies of applied linguistics and/or its subfields (Antón, 2011; Baldauf & Kaplan, 2010; Belcher, 2006; Hinkel, 2006).

There still exist some issues that need more attention, however. First, many studies have analyzed unrepresentative corpora since (a) most of them have focused only on certain areas of the field (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hyland & Jiang, 2020), and (b) some have explored too few journals (Belcher, 2006; Stapleton & Shao, 2017). Second, some studies – even some of those published in recent years – have analyzed research articles published years ago (Cohen & Macaro, 2009; Derrick, 2016; Lei & Liu, 2019); hence, more research is needed to provide an update view of research in the field. Third, some studies have been region-specific (Antón, 2011; Baldauf & Kaplan, 2010). The fourth gap is related to the opportunity provided by new computer programs that are increasingly used to analyze research themes using a mathematical method called bibliometrics: “the application of mathematics and statistical methods” (Pritchard, 1969, p. 348). Bibliometrics allows researchers to analyze large corpora and compare them. However, as researchers adopting it have acknowledged, it is not sufficient by itself (Lei & Liu, 2018). Other data analysis techniques/software are needed to obtain a complete understanding of the phenomena under investigation. To address these gaps, up-to-date thematic analyses of articles published in different – not region- or subfield-specific – journals of the field should be done using both qualitative and quantitative strategies. Accordingly, this research attempts to address the following research question:

**Research Question One:** What are the research theme trends in applied linguistics research articles from 2012 to 2022?

## Methodology

### Design of the Study

A diachronic corpus-based approach was applied to analyze themes in applied linguistics research articles. This approach enables researchers to explore contextual factors influencing the emergence of specific themes (Gries & Hilpert, 2010). In the current study, this approach was used to analyze themes of applied linguistics research articles and their connections with contextual factors. The model developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was also used to analyze the research themes. This section explains procedures taken to this end.

### Corpus

Journals were selected based on the lists of top journals provided by VanPatten and Williams (2002), Jung (2004), and Phakiti (2016) as well as through consulting university professors and experts in the field. We attempted to select journals, which cover all or most of the areas of applied linguistics as introduced by Cook (2003):

- a. Language and education: Language education, first language education, additional language education (which is often divided into second language education and foreign language education), clinical linguistics and language testing;
- b. Language, work and law: Workplace communication, language planning and forensic linguistics; and

- c. Language, information and effect: Literary stylistics, critical discourse analysis, translation and interpretation, information design and lexicography.

Likewise, journals which deal with applied linguistics in general, rather than its certain subfields, were preferred since it is believed that subfield-specific journals do not provide reliable data for the purposes of this study. The reason is that they mainly publish research in certain areas, and this may skew the data in favor of those areas. Therefore, despite being included in the lists developed by the studies mentioned above, journals such as *Language Testing*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* were excluded. Table 1 provides a list of the journals:

**Table 1**

*A List of Journals*

Journals	IF	IF Quartile	Indexed in
Annual review of Applied linguistics	3.87	Q1	ISI, Scopus
Applied Linguistics	3.6	Q1	ISI, Scopus
Applied Linguistics Review	2.1	Q1	ISI, Scopus
Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics	0.19	Q2	Scopus
Australian Review of Applied Linguistics	0.9	Q2	ISI, Scopus
Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics	1	Q3	ISI, Scopus
Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics	0.5	Q3	ISI, Scopus
European Journal of Applied Linguistics	0.8	Q3	ISI, Scopus
Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics	0.2	Q2	Scopus
International Journal of Applied Linguistics	1.5	Q2	ISI, Scopus
International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching	1.4	Q2	ISI, Scopus
ITL - International Journal of Applied Linguistics	2.1	Q1	ISI, Scopus
IRAL - Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics	1	Q2	Scopus
TESOL Journal	1.3	Q2	Scopus
Modern language Journal	4.7	Q1	ISI, Scopus
RELC Journal	3.6	Q1	ISI, Scopus
Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies	0.6	Q3	ISI, Scopus
System	2.08	Q1	ISI, Scopus
TESOL Quarterly	3	Q1	ISI, Scopus
VIAL - Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics	0.3	Q2	ISI, Scopus

These journals are indexed by Web of Science. Three thousand papers (150 from each journal) published from 2012 to 2022 in these journals were selected. Book reviews, commentaries, and research articles written in languages other than English were excluded.

### Data Collection Procedure

The current analysis focuses on research articles published from 2012 to 2022 as previous research has adequately addressed papers published in earlier decades (Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Kennedy, 1988; Lei & Liu, 2019; Lindstormberg, 2016; Liu & Hu, 2021). The focus on this period allowed us to provide a view of recent shifts and developments in research interests, which are important due to the increasing technological and sociological changes, which influence the field. Three thousand original research articles (150 from each of the 20 top-tier journals) were retrieved from online databases. The journals selected in this study encompass a wide range of topics within the field. It should be noted here that special issues were excluded from the corpus of this study as they might deviate from the standard policies of the journals. To ensure that a rigorous and replicable methodology have been adopted and facilitate systematic tracking, each article was assigned a unique identifier. In this regard, the articles were saved using a two-digit code: The first digit represented the paper's sequential identifier, while the subsequent digit indicated the journal in which it was published.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

Based on the above explanation, the inclusion criteria were:

1. Research papers must be original research studies published from 2012 to 2022.
2. Research papers must be published in the journals listed in Table 1.

Exclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Book reviews, commentaries, and research papers published in languages other than English were excluded.
2. Special issues were excluded.
3. Journals that concentrate only on specific areas of applied linguistics were excluded.
4. Research articles published before 2012 were excluded.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

To identify research themes, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory was used. As Kasurinen (2012) argued, the grounded theory method involves three steps: Open coding (extracting categories from data), axial coding (identifying connections between categories), and selective coding (identifying and describing core categories). Hence, this method was employed to extract categories, synthesize those that were convergent around a similar theme, constantly analyze the themes, and determine headings and sub-headings. The starting point was reading the titles, abstracts, and keywords. In cases that these sections did not provide sufficient information for determining the theme of a paper, the researchers moved into the text to find its main focus. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), themes found in the reviewed articles and the newly identified ones should be continually compared to obtain the final main theme. Hence, in the present study, each paper was read to extract its code and form a tentative theme. Then the next article was read to find its theme and compare it to previous ones. If one theme was determined for both, they were not changed and if they were different, a new theme was added. In some cases, two or more similar themes were merged to form a core theme.

To pursue the principles of trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research, the researchers took advantage of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) key criteria in this respect. As for the former, investigator triangulation was used to ensure credibility, including three independent experts independently analyzing 300 papers, resulting in an inter-rater reliability of 92%. To ensure transferability, the researchers yielded thorough descriptions of the research context. A comprehensive audit trail of all research decisions was conducted to achieve dependability, which included taking notes on coding and methodological choices. Concerning confirmability, the researchers documented their reflections in the reflexive journals to ascertain that their interpretations were grounded in data and lower researcher bias. Regarding rigor, the researchers took advantage of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory to maintain this aspect as well.

### **Results**

This study aimed to explore the research themes and trends in applied linguistics journal articles published from 2012 to 2022. A comprehensive analysis was conducted on 1,500 articles from top-tier journals in the field to identify the research themes and their relative prevalence. Table 2 shows the main themes as well as their percentages:

**Table 2***Main Themes and Their Percentages*

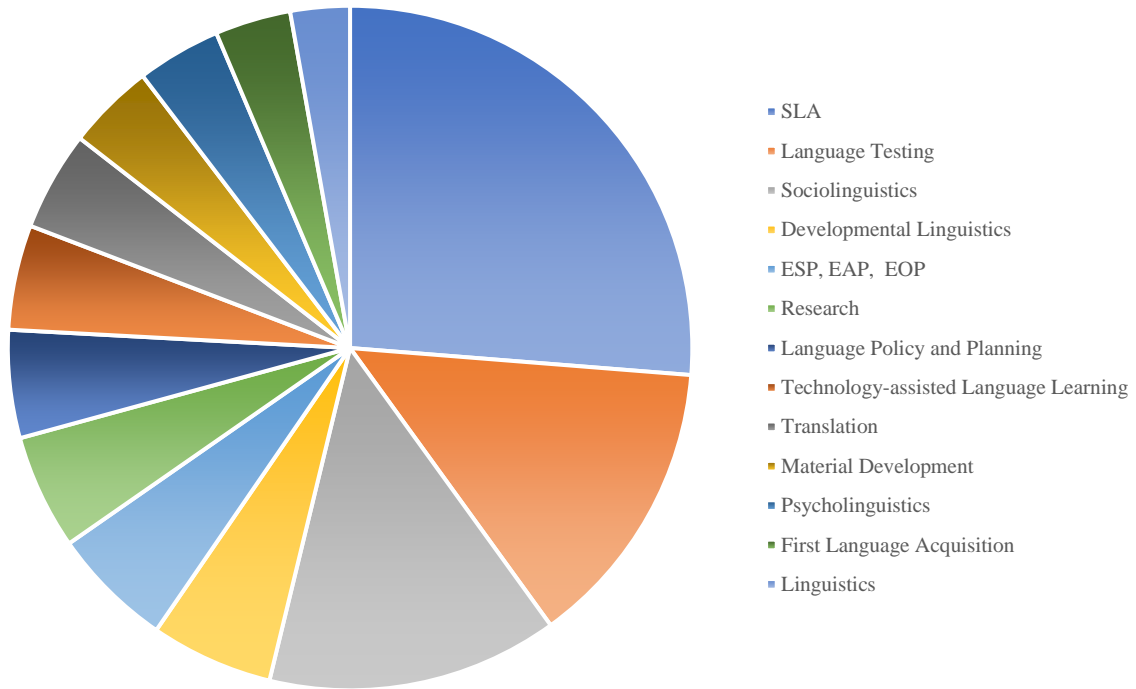
Themes	Percentages
SLA	25.44
Language Testing	13.34
Sociolinguistics	13.33
Developmental Linguistics	5.61
ESP, EAP, EOP	5.57
Research	5.26
Language Policy and Planning	4.94
Technology-assisted Language Learning	4.8
Translation	4.55
Material Development	4
Psycholinguistics	3.85
First Language Acquisition	3.47
Linguistics	2.72
Neurolinguistics	1.63

As the table shows, the themes identified in the analysis span a wide range of areas within applied linguistics, including SLA; Language Testing; Sociolinguistics; Developmental Linguistics; English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP); Research; Language Policy and Planning; Technology-assisted Language Learning; Translation; Material Development; Psycholinguistics; First Language Acquisition; Linguistics; and Neurolinguistics. An explanation seems to be necessary regarding two themes. The theme of Research was considered to be composed of considerations in conducting research; for example, Researcher Identity, and Narrative Analysis. The theme of ESP, EAP, EOP included major rather overlapping sub-themes such as ESP, EAP, EOP, and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The reason we categorized them under one single main theme is that they have a lot in common.

According to the table, SLA accounts for about a quarter of the themes, followed by language testing and sociolinguistics, which are closely tied, respectively representing 13.34% and 13.33% of the articles. These three most-common themes, as three core categories of the field, represent over half of the papers analyzed in this study. Developmental Linguistics; ESP, EAP, EOP; and Research each accounted for 5-6% of the articles, indicating that these areas have also received much attention in the field. Neurolinguistics, Linguistics, and First Language Acquisition comprised smaller percentages, ranging from 1.63 to 3.47. To provide a visual representation of the data, Figure 1 presents a pie chart on the relative proportions of the main research themes:

Figure 1

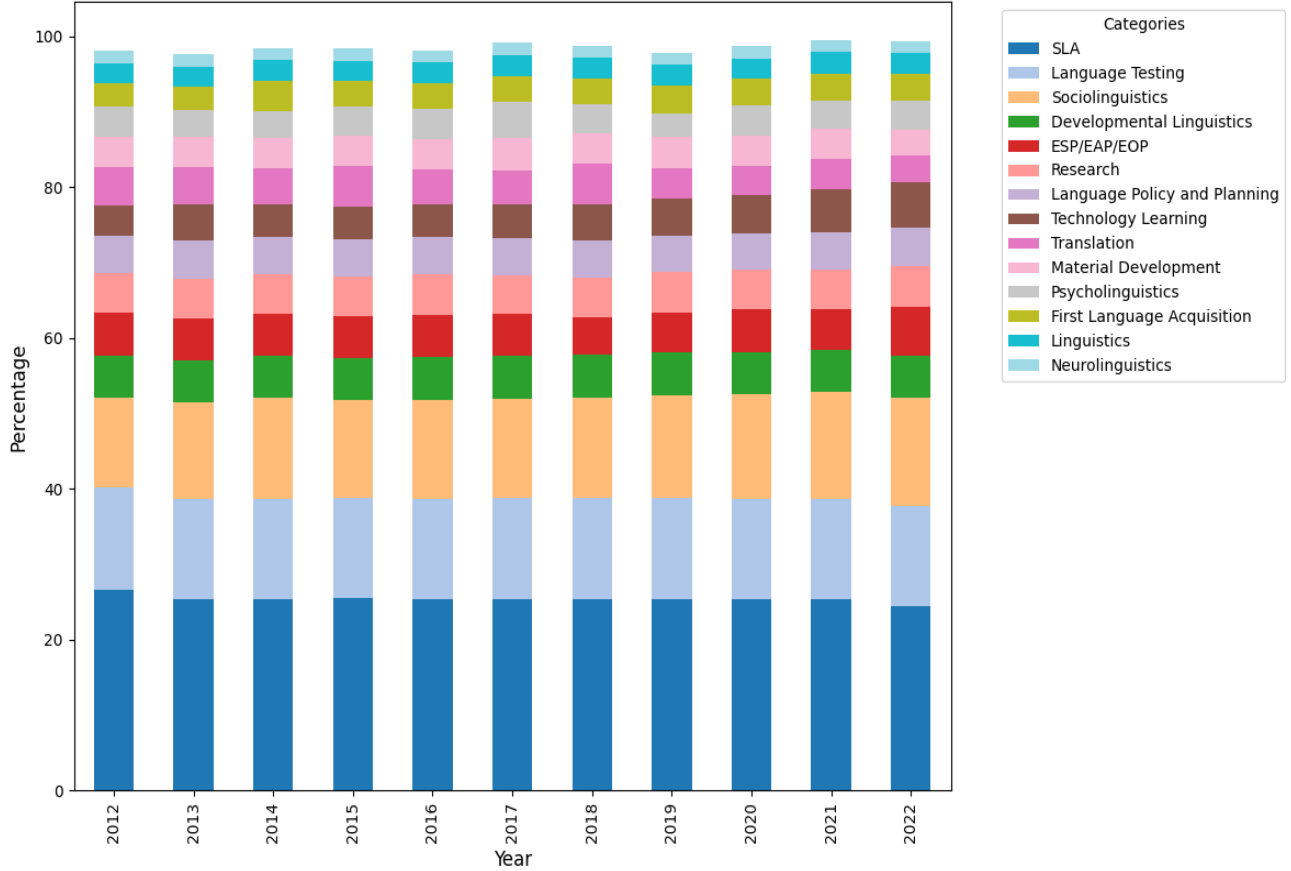
*The Relative Proportion of the Main Themes*



In addition to the total percentage of each main theme, their year-by-year representation were calculated to investigate how the research themes have changed yearly. Results are shown in Figure 2 as follows:

Figure 2

Year by Year Representation of the Main Themes

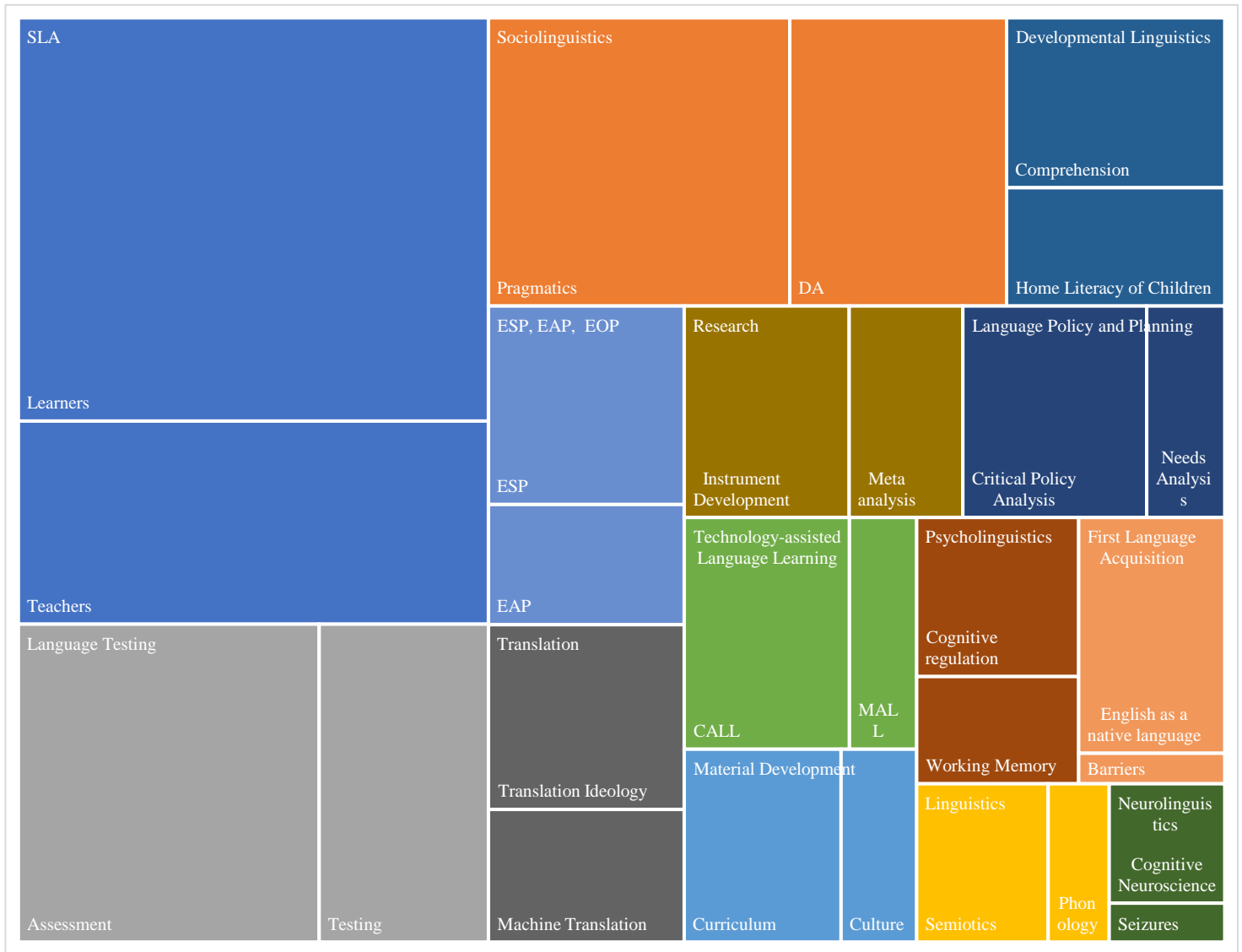


As the figure shows, there are fluctuating interest levels across the main themes, with the exception of Technology-assisted Language Learning, which demonstrated a gradual increase. SLA was consistently the highest one across all years. Less frequent themes such as Linguistics and Neurolinguistics maintained their lower representation in comparison with other themes in the time-frame of the study.

Each of these main themes included various sub-themes (see Appendix for a list of these sub-themes). It should be noted that within each main theme, some sub-themes tended to be the dominant ones. The two dominant sub-themes of each main theme are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Dominant Sub-Themes of Each Main Theme



As the figure shows, most of the main themes are mainly comprised of common issues in the field. For instance, Teachers and Learners have been the main focus of the SLA theme. In the second theme, Sociolinguistics, there has been a notable focus on Pragmatics and DA. Within the Language Testing theme, Assessment and Testing are represented more than other sub-themes. However, some main themes have rather less common areas in applied linguistics as their most frequent sub-themes. For instance, Seizures is the second most common sub-theme of neurolinguistics. Table 3 shows the total number of sub-themes within each main theme:

**Table 3***The Total Number of Sub-Themes within Each Main Themes*

Themes	Total Number of Sub-themes
SLA	76
Language Testing	4
Sociolinguistics	38
Developmental Linguistics	4
ESP, EAP, EOP	3
Research	13
Language Policy and Planning	8
Technology-assisted Language Learning	4
Translation	11
Material Development	15
Psycholinguistics	14
First Language Acquisition	2
Linguistics	14
Neurolinguistics	3
Total	236

As the table shows, the SLA theme, as the most frequent main-theme, includes the most diverse sub-themes as well (N = 103), followed by Sociolinguistics (N = 38), and Material Development (N = 15). Language Testing, which was the second most frequent theme, is one of the least diverse ones in terms of sub-themes (N = 4). The other least diverse ones include First Language Acquisition (N = 2); Neurolinguistics (N = 3); ESP, EAP, EOP (N = 3); Technology-assisted Language Learning (N = 4); and Developmental Linguistics (N = 4).

It should be mentioned here that each of these sub-themes included some sub-categories. For instance, the sub-theme of Learners included sub-categories such as Learner Identity, and Learner Motivation. Similarly, the sub-theme of Teachers involved sub-categories like Teacher Education, and Teacher Perspectives. The sub-theme of DA was composed of Discourse Markers, Intertextuality, etc. Also, the sub-theme of Pragmatics was made up of sub-categories, including Interlanguage Pragmatics. Even some of these sub-categories themselves included some sub-categories. For instance, Learner Identity included sub-categories such as Learner Identity Negotiation, and Learner Identity Development. Due to the space limitations, not all the sub-themes and sub-categories as well as their own sub-categories are mentioned here. It is worth mentioning, however, that a total of 1251 sub-categories were found in the current study.

### Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the themes of applied linguistics research articles. A wide range of themes with different frequencies were found. Results of the analysis revealed that the three most prominent research themes were SLA, Language Testing, and Sociolinguistics, which collectively accounted for over 50% of the articles analyzed. The dominance of these themes seems to be due to a combination of some factors. First, these areas have historically been well-established and influential within applied linguistics, attracting significant research attention and funding (Ellis, 2021; Hughes, 2020; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). In particular, the historical preference both strengthens their significance and establishes a feedback cycle in which research augments upon previously established findings, consequently further positing these themes within the academic discourse. Second, these themes are highly relevant to practical applications in language teaching, learning, and assessment (Winke & Brunfaut, 2021). The practical implications of these themes are important for teachers and policymakers, increasing their probability of acquiring funding while

also gaining prominence in research agendas. Third, the growth of international communication has increased the need for research that addresses language use complexities in different contexts. This has tended to contribute to the prominence of these three themes. It should be noted, however, the disproportionate focus on these three themes raises concerns about potential biases and limitations within the field. In other words, it raises questions about the field's willingness to challenge established paradigms and explore alternative perspectives.

The dominance of SLA as the most prevalent theme is consistent with the discipline's historical emphasis on exploring the cognitive, social, and pedagogical aspects of SLA and teaching (Hijazo-Gascón & Llopis-García, 2019; Pennycook, 2021; Rose & McKinley, 2017). While this consistency across different studies suggests that these themes are enduring areas of interest within the field, it also highlights a potential bias towards this particular area in applied linguistics. The continued dominance of SLA research, in spite of its limitations and potential for a narrow focus, might suggest the field's unwillingness to challenge the established status quo. It should be noted, however, that few studies have argued that the field is changing its agenda. Pennycook (2010), for instance, stated that the field has moved toward a more critically-oriented perspective on language. Language Testing, as the second most frequent theme, is another well-established area within applied linguistics. The prominence of this theme underscores the ongoing importance of developing and evaluating language assessment tools, as well as investigating the sociopolitical and educational implications of language testing practices (Shohamy, 2020). Considering the increasing prominence given to high-stakes standardized tests within international educational systems, a thorough examination of language testing methodologies is, therefore, significant. Sociolinguistics was the third most prominent theme. This finding reflects the field's longstanding interest in exploring the complex relationships between language, society, and culture (Hymes, 2020). Pennycook (2010), for instance, argued that the field have started to move towards exploring language within the context of social life.

The predominance of these three themes might be ascribed to the sociopolitical and economic dimensions that influence academic research. For instance, funding platforms tend to stress the established zones, which emanates from an unbalanced concentration on these themes. This trend illuminates the impact of power dynamics on the dissemination of resources and eminence of specific themes, usually marginalizing emerging or more critical themes, including those germane to technology or critical applied linguistics. Furthermore, the editorial plans and policies set in high-impact and tier-one journals might prioritize outmoded themes that align with the established conventions; thus, strengthening the prevailing academic strands. This phenomenon might establish a cycle in which emerging research areas confront in achieving visibility; as a result, the dominance of specific themes is strengthened. In this regard, this study contributes to the literature through providing a thorough analysis of the traits that shape research themes in applied linguistics. In essence, this research characterizes the significance of examining how external parameters influence, particularly power dynamics and funding structures, and shape academic discourse within the field of applied linguistics.

Developmental Linguistics, ESP/EAP/EOP, and Research each represented around 5-6% of the articles. This moderate representation suggests that while these areas are acknowledged within applied linguistics, they may not attract as much attention as the more dominant themes. Earlier studies have also recognized these areas. Developmental Linguistics, which focuses on the processes of language development and acquisition, has been shown to provide valuable insights into the stages and mechanisms of language learning (Lidz et al., 2016). It is highly critical for realizing the processes through which individuals gradually enhance language proficiency, thereby influencing instructional strategies and curriculum development. Meanwhile, the combined theme of ESP, EAP, and EOP reflects the increasing relevance of English for specific purposes in various contexts, including academic and professional settings (Hyland, 2006). Moreover, consistent with earlier studies, the inclusion of Research underscores the importance of methodological considerations in advancing the field and ensuring the validity of research findings (Schmitt & Rodgers, 2002).

The relatively low representation of Technology-assisted Language Learning (4.80%) and Material Development (4.00%) might suggest that the field is not engaged with contemporary educational practices. This finding seems to be consistent with previous studies, which have demonstrated that technology and material development have not been among the most dominant themes (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Ker et al., 2013). Despite the growing recognition of the role of digital technologies in enhancing language instruction, the limited number of articles in this area suggests that research may not be keeping pace with advancements in technology. This underrepresentation is concerning, given that effective integration of technology can significantly enhance learner engagement and facilitate personalized learning experiences. As educational contexts develop, researchers need to canvass the effective utilization of technology in enhancing language learning results. Moreover, while innovative pedagogical materials are crucial for effective language education, the minimal focus on this theme may indicate a missed opportunity to explore how they can be leveraged to meet the diverse needs of learners.

Neurolinguistics (1.63%), Linguistics (2.72%), and First Language Acquisition (3.47%) accounted for smaller percentages of the articles analyzed. Neurolinguistics and first language acquisition have not been even reported as themes by the literature (Liu & Hu, 2021; Rubino, 2010). This raises questions about the potential for a neglect of fundamental areas of research. While these areas may be considered more specialized or niche, they are nonetheless essential for a comprehensive understanding of language and language learning. Neurolinguistics, for instance, offers valuable insights into the neural mechanisms underlying language processing and acquisition, which can inform our understanding of language disorders and the development of more effective language interventions (Roberts et al., 2018). First Language Acquisition provides information about the universal principles of language learning, which can inform our understanding of second language acquisition and development. Our finding on the theme of linguistics does not seem to be consistent with that of previous studies as this theme has been recognized by earlier studies (Liu & Hu, 2021). Linguistics, as the foundational discipline of language study, provides a critical framework for understanding language structure, function, and evolution, which is essential for informed language teaching and learning. This might be the reason that this theme has received much attention in the literature.

The constrained representation of Neurolinguistics and Technology-Assisted Language Learning (TALL) might represent biases in the field that spotlight obsolete and recognized themes. For example, despite being able to represent cognitive processes and procedures in language acquisition and use, neurolinguistics has confronted hassles and predicaments in gaining prominence as a result of inadequate funding and institutional support. Similarly, TALL has gained prominence in recent years, specifically because of the prompt advancements in technology-assisted education. However, its underrepresentation evinces that it may not currently be considered a priority in applied linguistics research. This might stem from multiple parameters, entailing the unwillingness of funding organizations to finance innovative but unfamiliar domains, or the preference of the discipline for conventional research themes.

Further analysis revealed that each of the main themes consisted of various sub-themes, which had some sub-categories. The SLA theme, as the most prominent main theme, also emerged as the most diverse, with 103 distinct sub-themes identified. This finding suggests that researchers in the SLA domain have explored a wide range of specific topics and issues, reflecting the multifaceted nature of second language acquisition and learning. This aligns with earlier studies, which have shown that SLA encompasses a wide range of topics (Ellis, 2018). The diversity of sub-themes within the Sociolinguistics (38 sub-themes) and Material Development (15 sub-themes) themes also underscores the breadth of these research areas. Hymes (2019) suggested that sociolinguistics research needs to address multiple variables that influence language use. Similarly, as Tomlinson (2020) pointed out, research in material development should focus on various considerations in the design, evaluation, and implementation of language learning resources. In contrast, some themes, such as Language Testing, Developmental Linguistics, and First Language Acquisition, had relatively fewer sub-themes, indicating a more focused research agenda within these areas. This could be

due to the more specialized nature of the research questions and methodologies employed in these sub-fields. Larsen-Freeman (2017), also, stated that the specialized nature of some areas may limit their diversity. The restricted number of sub-themes in these areas might also evince a need for more innovative approaches to research that can expand the gamut of research and intensify the exploration of new dimensions.

Overall, this study evinced a notable prevalence of established themes, including SLA, Language Testing, and Sociolinguistics, while also accentuating the demand to adopt interdisciplinary and novel themes. The struggle between conventional research areas and new ones illustrates an ongoing struggle within applied linguistics concerning its ability to accommodate with contemporary issues. Moreover, the reluctance of the field to adopt emerging themes such as critical and technological ones could suggest underlying epistemological divisions within applied linguistics, where traditionalists opt for established disciplines due to their perceived dependability and significance. This is incompatible with the advocacy for a transition toward more innovative and critical viewpoints (Pennycook, 2010).

### Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to analyze research themes and trends in applied linguistics journal articles published from 2012 to 2022. A comprehensive analysis of 1,500 articles revealed that the three most prominent research themes were SLA, Language Testing, and Sociolinguistics, respectively. In contrast, other themes such as Neurolinguistics, Linguistics, and First Language Acquisition were underrepresented. Additionally, the study found that Developmental Linguistics, ESP, EAP, EOP, and Research Methodology each accounted for around 5-6% of the articles, while Technology-assisted Language Learning and Material Development were less prominent. SLA was the most diverse theme in terms of the number of sub-themes, while Language Testing, Developmental Linguistics, and First Language Acquisition were the least diverse ones.

The dominance of SLA, Language Testing, and Sociolinguistics indicates a continued emphasis on these well-established areas, driven by their relevance to practical applications in language education and assessment. However, the underrepresentation of themes like Neurolinguistics and First Language Acquisition raises critical questions about the field's willingness to explore alternative perspectives and challenge established paradigms. Moreover, the limited focus on Technology-Assisted Language Learning and Material Development indicates a lack of research on how digital innovations can enhance language instruction, especially in an increasingly technological educational world.

As for the implications of the study, the identified themes might be helpful in prioritizing areas of the field for further investigation. They further can be helpful in developing language policy and planning initiatives aimed at promoting diversity in applied linguistics. In fact, the results underscore the necessity for educational policymakers to expand the scope of applied linguistics research. By recognizing themes that are usually neglected, including the technological and critical ones, they can create more inclusive language education practices. Likewise, teachers and materials developers are required to take the themes identified in this research into account. This might cause the design of more comprehensive language programs that embrace both established and emerging domains of applied linguistics; thus preparing learners to address the current hassles effectively.

Similarly, the findings of this research illuminate the significance of incorporating groundbreaking, interdisciplinary approaches into instructional strategies to more efficiently prepare students to confront contemporary language concerns. Furthermore, educational researchers can deploy these results to canvass the impact of interdisciplinary approaches on language acquisition and teaching. Also, the wide range of themes in applied linguistics research shows opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. In this regard, researchers from different fields including psychology, computer science, and sociology can collaborate to

address complicated language-related issues. Furthermore, due to the focus on the global landscape of applied linguistics research studies, including research from various geographical and linguistic contexts, this thematic analysis can promote cross-cultural understanding, collaboration at a global level, and language policy and planning exchange.

Some limitations should be acknowledged, which might provide avenues for further research. First, the analysis focused on ISI journals, that facilitates the analysis of high-impact research. However, this exclusion results in constraints on the generalizability and applicability of the results, including a reinforcement of existing publications biases favoring established themes. This may eventuate the marginalization of emerging areas, and reflecting the interests and perspectives of a particular group of researchers. Therefore, forthcoming studies should incorporate a wider gamut of journals to advance the representativeness of their findings. Second, as grounded theory was employed to specify the themes, it is pivotal to represent the potential biases latent in qualitative analysis. Notwithstanding the strides to preserve trustworthiness and rigor, the coding process might be influenced by subjective reasonings and interpretations, as each coder represented their own standpoints and biases, potentially influencing the identification of themes. Future studies may incorporate alternative approaches, including looking for insights from outside experts in the field. Third, the selection criteria were limited to papers published in English. This decision, aimed at ensuring consistency and emphasizing the primary language of academic discourse, inevitably limited the breadth of the analysis. This is specifically important in applied linguistics, where multilingualism and cross-cultural factors are necessary for comprehending language use and instruction in various contexts. Analyzing papers written in other languages and comparing them with the findings of the current study might yield valuable results.

The fourth limitation was that the present study was limited to published papers, which may be subject to publication bias as journals prefer to publish studies with statistically significant results (Plonsky, 2015). Hence, unpublished manuscripts could be explored by future studies. Fifth, this research focused only on papers and did not investigate experts' opinions, which can be explored by future studies to provide a view of the reasons behind current practices in the themes of applied linguistics research articles. In other words, encouraging the implementation of mixed-methods approaches has the potential to heighten the analysis of research themes within applied linguistics. Additionally, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data can evince more reflective insights as for the implications of language research in practical contexts. Similarly, future studies should investigate the convergence of applied linguistics with other disciplines, such as cognitive science and neuroscience, in order to explain their influences on themes within applied linguistics research. Finally, it should be admitted that human error or subjective interpretation during the analysis might have led to inconsistencies or biases in the results. It is worth mentioning, however, that we attempted to decrease this as much as possible through asking three experienced analysts to assist us.

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**Appendix. Sub-Themes of Each Main Theme**

Themes	Sub-Themes
SLA	Learners, teachers, skills in L2 learning, post-humanist SLA, multilingual approaches in SLA, task-based language teaching, feedback-based language teaching, explicit/implicit instruction, focus on form, kids L2 learning, CLIL, genre-based pedagogy, processing instruction, culture in L2 learning, medium of instruction, corpus-based teaching, content-based instruction, literature-based instruction, strategy-based instruction, instructional transformation, multimodal language teaching, translanguaging pedagogy, identity-based pedagogy, intensive English programs, uptake, interaction, input, output, pronunciation instruction, fluency, mixed instruction, attainment, autonomous learning behavior, justice in L2 classrooms, equity in L2 classrooms, self-access language learning, collaborative learning, L2 proficiency, L2 achievement, power relation in L2 classrooms, identity, critical reading, CEFR, acquisition of aspect, interlanguage transfer, L1 interference, ideology in classrooms, incidental language learning, cognitive load, biliteracy, gender, humor, commodification of language instruction, intercultural communication, English-medium instruction, English as an additional language, extensive reading, hybrid learning, language shift, multiple intelligences, self-directed learning, SLA theory construction, communicative language teaching, self-regulated learning in SLA, collaborative learning in L2 classes, context and SLA, formal vs. informal L2 classes, globalization and L2 learning, the effect of games, digital literacy and SLA, the role of humor in L2 learning, language learning myths, the effect of language exposure, the effect of music and songs, sociocultural theory and L2 learning
Language Testing	Language assessment, language testing, evaluation, critical language testing
Sociolinguistics	Pragmatics, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, social presence, culture, language ideology, globalization, class, race, pidgin, English varieties, heritage, identity, multiculturalism, multi/plural turn in language, social presence, linguistic marketing, child-adult interaction, language contact, social cohesion,

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	social identification, language dominance, language maintenance, multilingualism, realism, school-parents communication, third culture kids, world Englishes, language and gender, ethnolinguistics, speech communities, youth language, language and social justice, language and emotion, language and migration, accent and social perception, regional dialects, social norms
Developmental Linguistics	Child L2 learning, home literacy of children, phonological development, morphological development
ESP, EAP, EOP	ESP, EAP, EOP
Research	Empirical findings, action research challenges, researcher identity, autoethnography, mixed-method research, graphics, quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, instrument development, instrument validation, meta-analysis, narrative analysis, researcher bias
Language Policy and Planning	Needs analysis, learner identity, critical language policy, policy on multilingualism, policy vs. practice, minority languages, language ideology, university policies
Technology-Assisted Language Learning	CALL, MALL, internet in language teaching, online learning
Translation	Sentence splitting in translation, machine translation, translation ideology, translation quality, translation self-critique, translation of literary texts, translation of taboo words, simultaneous translation, cultural context in translation, translation and technology, translation and ethics
Materials Development	Curriculum development, syllabus design, culture in material development, gender in material development, digital and multimedia materials, authentic materials, material evaluation, collaboration in material development, task-based materials, gamification in materials, storytelling in materials, research-informed material development, material development and ethics, interactivity in materials, humor in materials
Psycholinguistics	Intrinsic and extrinsic values, eye movement, involvement load, working memory, cognitive regulation, sentence processing, learner psychological needs, image needs, positive psychology, language learning enjoyment, psychopragmatics, people mindset, psychophysiology, language and thought
First Language Acquisition	English as a native language, stages of language development
Linguistics	Phonology, semiotics, semantics, sign language, inclusion, linguistic relativity, linguistic diversity, contrastive linguistics, linguistic imperialism, linguistic landscape, linguistic transformation, corpus-based linguistics, legal linguistics, morphology
Neurolinguistics	Cognitive neuroscience, epileptic/non-epileptic seizures, lateralization of language

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