

# Philosophies - Formalist and Functionalist Traditions in Language Teacher Training

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Two different traditions in language teaching are the formalist (also called structuralist) and the functionalist (also called emergent or interactive) perspectives. The former views language as coming primarily from the brain (it is the prevailing tradition in North America), the latter sees language as coming primarily from society, and interaction within it (it is very common in Australia and the UK). The tradition that a university leans towards has a huge effect on how TESOL is taught at that institution and so also the way in which graduates of its programs go on to teach English.

## Introduction

The training of ESL teachers is different than the training of other teachers, but there are similarities. All teacher-training is designed to train someone to teach a particular subject or subjects to a particular audience. In the case of master's degrees in language teaching, the particular subject is the English language and the target audience is usually adults (normally, though not exclusively, tertiary students).

In education systems where teacher training is a year-long program following an undergraduate degree (for example, a PGCE in the UK, or a consecutive B.Ed program in English Canada) student-teachers learn to teach the subject or subjects they studied in their undergraduate degree (called a 'teachable', it is an area taught at the target level. Math is a teachable at all levels. Linguistics and Psychology are usually not teachables even if you have a degree in them because they are not usually taught at high schools). This means that most people in a particular teacher education program (say, people becoming English literature teachers) think about school and approach problems in a similar way (though there are differences in the way English literature is taught, there is a similarity because graduates are people who are, or were, interested in English literature enough to study it for several years).

ESL teachers, on the other hand, come from a wider variety of backgrounds. Common backgrounds include education, English literature, languages and linguistics, and communications. However, people with backgrounds in psychology or computer science are also not uncommon. This means that people enter language teaching programs think about academic work in a much more diverse manner and a given cohort likely has a greater range of interests than in the typical one-year bachelor of education to teach a specific subject.

In my experience, there still remains widespread lack of knowledge about major differences in these language-teaching post-graduate programs even amongst people who have already graduated from one. People who do a master's degree in one school are very unlikely to do another one elsewhere and so many graduates may believe that because they studied x, y and z at university A, that the same things were studied at university B, even if university B is located in a different English-speaking country on a different continent. After completing a degree off-campus from universities in Australia or the UK, many North Americans living abroad in Japan return to North America and discover that teachers there have learned very different ideas about language than they did.

The province of Ontario in Canada, where I am from, is probably rare, in that the path to becoming a language teacher at the university level often requires two programs of studies: a CTESL (known by various names, including at one time a B.Ed (TESL) at one school, and a master's degree in Applied Linguistics (unless the ESL teacher has a graduate degree in another area, in which case the CTESL is all that is required). The graduate degree is usually taken after completing a couple of years of experience post-CTESL. In most cases, the CTESL is pursued as a "consecutive" teaching program (entering the program after graduating from the undergraduate level) but, as is fairly common for teacher-training in Ontario, it is also possible to pursue the program "concurrently" after finishing the first year of university studies. (It will mean that the student graduates with both an undergraduate degree and the

teaching qualification at the same time. This route is not any faster than the consecutive route, it just enables students to spread out the courses in a different manner). In my case, I did my CTESL consecutively, then came to Japan, and then did a master's degree in TESOL through a university in Australia several years later.

In this article, I review differences between two traditions in language teaching and show how each tradition is implemented in a university level teacher-training program. I want to help people who are thinking of doing postgraduate work in language teaching understand differences in programs, and also help people working in universities who may be puzzled as to why some of their colleagues seem to have a very different understanding of language teaching than they do.

### Different Branding of Products and Acronyms

For someone who is trying to decide on a training program, a difficulty is the number of acronyms specific to language teaching: TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), EAP (English for Academic Purposes) etc. When people are trying to decide on a master's degree in language teaching, they are further confused because degrees tend to be called either a master's of "Applied Linguistics" or a master of "TESOL". The master's degree itself may be a Master of Arts (M.A.) degree, it may be a Master of Education (M.Ed.), or it may even be a Master of Science (M.Sc.). At least one university in Ontario offers a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics (TEFL). Often these people turn to discussion boards or to acquaintances for advice. Common advice given is to look at different programs and to take the one that seems most interesting, or closest aligned with what the person would like to study, and not to worry about the name of the program. Whether a program is in the formalist or the functionalist tradition is largely hidden from the student teacher.

### Formalism and Functionalism

An extremely useful resource for explaining the two traditions can be textbooks on discourse analysis. However, few people who do not have an academic background in linguistics or applied linguistics will know (or even have heard of) discourse analysis. Schiffron, in *Approaches to Discourse* reviews the literature on these paradigms and shows the following qualities of each from another writer, Hymes (1974), as shown in the chart below (Figure 1).

This is highly informative for people who have already completed university work in the area, but will not likely be of much use to someone who has no background in linguistics and just wants to have some way of differentiating programs, especially if they are looking into doing an off-campus program while teaching in Japan or elsewhere. Fortunately, Schiffron then goes on to review Leech's (1983) contrast of the two traditions.

1. Formalists (e.g. Chomsky) tend to regard language primarily as a mental phenomenon. Functionalists (e.g.

Halliday) tend to regard it primarily as a societal phenomenon.

2. Formalists tend to explain linguistic universals as deriving from a common genetic inheritance of the human species. Functionalists tend to explain them as deriving from the universality of the uses to which language is put in human society.

3. Formalists are inclined to explain children's acquisition of language in terms of a built-in human capacity to learn language. Functionalists are inclined to explain it in terms of the development of the child's communicative needs and abilities in society.

4. Above all, formalists study language as an autonomous system, whereas functionalists study it in relation to its social function. (Schiffron, 1994, pp. 21 – 22)

That someone can do a graduate degree in TESOL without reading, or hearing, the name Chomsky very often at all could be surprising to someone with a master's in TESOL from a North American university. However, the same could be said about the absence of Halliday and his adherents from the perspective of someone who did a TESOL master's degree in Australia. For someone thinking of doing a degree in language teaching, Leech's information could help because it is relatively free of jargon.

**Figure 1**

“Structural”	“Functional”
Structure of language (code) as grammar	Structure of speech (act, event) as ways of speaking
Use merely implements, perhaps limits, may correlate with, what is analyzed as code; analysis of code prior to analysis of use	Analysis of use prior to analysis of code; organization of use discloses additional features and relations; shows code and use in integral (dialectal) relation
Referential function, fully semanticized uses as norm	Gamut of stylistic or social functions
Elements and structures analytically arbitrary (in cross-cultural or historical perspective), or universal (in theoretical perspective)	Elements and structures as ethnographically appropriate (“psychiatrically” in Sapir’s sense)
Functional (adaptive) equivalence of languages; all languages essentially (potentially) equal	Functional (adaptive) differentiation of languages, varieties, styles; these being existentially equivalent
Single homogenous code and community (“replication of uniformity”)	Speech community as matrix of code-repertoires, or speech styles (“organization of diversity”)
Fundamental concepts, such as speech community, speech act, fluent speaker, functions of speech and of languages, taken for granted or arbitrarily postulated	Fundamental concepts taken as problematic and to be investigated

(Schiffron, 1994, p. 21)

## An Example of Each Type of Program- Formalist and Functionalist

I will look at Carleton University's Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (CTESL) from Ottawa, Canada as an example of a North American program in the formalist tradition, and Deakin University's Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MTESOL) from Melbourne, Australia as an example of a program in the functionalist tradition because I have personally done both of these programs.

Both Carleton's CTESL and Deakin's MTESOL programs can be completed in two semesters of full-time study, and are initial training programs in that neither requires a particular background in education or linguistics for entry (although both recommend a background in a language-related area). In both Australia and Canada, unlike in the UK, all coursework master's degrees are very common. Some things to keep in mind are that the CTESL program was done on-campus in Ottawa, while the MTESOL program was done off-campus over seven years later and I had been teaching in Japan for all but the first year between the two programs.

As with any academic program, the actual courses available can change over time. I do not consider this to be particularly problematic in this comparison because the point is not advertising for either or both of these programs, but to show the kinds of things studied in each tradition. Different schools in Australia and Canada will, of course, have variation in their programs, and outside of Ontario, a one-year certificate in TESL is not commonly required for entry into master's degrees in Applied Linguistics or TESOL.

It is tempting to suggest that major differences in these programs could be simply explained by the different target audience of each. The CTESL is primarily aimed for teachers of English as a Second Language (English language in countries where English is the main language spoken) and is a TESL Ontario approved course for teaching adult ESL in the government-funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. According to its marketing materials, the MTESOL is specifically targeted to people teaching overseas. However, both programs mention that they are suitable for the other situation as well, and it should be obvious that many graduates of both programs will very likely at some point want to work in the other situation. Below is a table from which two programs may be compared easily (Figure 2).

In the CTESL program, there is a lengthy list of linguistics electives from which the student picks two. This is to be expected given that the program is housed in a linguistics department. Electives in the Deakin MTESOL are education electives, and the program is housed in the faculty of education. However, normally, these electives can only be taken in the twelve-course program, or by people who have a four course post-graduate certificate in TESOL who want to complete the master's degree. People with a four-year degree taking in the eight-course master's can only take core and specialist courses. Reading a full list of the electives offered by Carleton shows some overlap with Deakin, but each year, very few courses from the full list of electives in Carleton's CTESL program are

actually offered, so many of its graduates will not have studied the in the overlapping areas.

**Figure 2**

	<b>Carleton CTESL</b>	<b>Deakin MTESOL</b>
<b>Department / Faculty</b>	Linguistics Departments	Faculty of Education
<b>Entry Requirements</b>	An undergraduate degree, or second year standing	An undergraduate degree
<b>Number of single term equivalent courses required</b>	10	8 (with a four year degree) 12 (with a three year degree)
<b>Available off-campus</b>	No	Yes
<b>Required or Core Courses</b>	Required Courses: Practicum; Methodology; Introduction to Linguistics or Language Matters; Introduction to Applied Linguistics / Discourse Studies; Major Structures; Second Language Acquisition	Core Courses: Linguistics for Language Teaching; Pedagogy in the Globalised Language Classroom; Innovation in Language Curriculum; Learning An Additional Language; Discourse Analysis for Language Teaching; Language Teaching Practice in Context
<b>Electives</b>	Available from a large list of theoretical linguistics courses (for example, Phonetics)	Available from a list of "Specialist" courses (for example, Intercultural Communication in Language Classrooms) and Education "elective" courses (for example, Educational Leadership)
<b>Research Thesis</b>	Not available	Available, but not mandatory, and will count for a large percentage of the degree if undertaken.

There are at least a couple of reasons why university websites rarely, if ever, explain whether its program is in the formalist or functionalist tradition. One reason is that a university's program offering pages are a form of advertising, and as such they want the information to be as clear as possible. The confusion from acronyms described above is not really relevant to individual schools, since in most cases, each school only uses one. A school will have a degree in TESOL, or a school may have a degree in TEFL. It is only confusing to the potential student who looks at more than one school (although hopefully most people looking for a professional degree program will look at more than one school). Schools across

North America are in the formalist tradition. If the target customer/student is also in North America, then stating the tradition is hardly necessary. And the same is true for institutions in Australia in the functionalist tradition. However, nowadays, many people do graduate degrees from schools in different countries, both on-campus and off.

### **Comparing Linguistics Courses**

Looking at terminology and descriptions of courses can be confusing for people deciding on a program. A course on “Linguistics” may be an overview of theoretical linguistics. It could also be a course on grammar. In this section, I will look at overlapping terminology and the differences in courses labeled “Linguistics” or dealing with the information described as “linguistics”.

At Deakin, “Linguistics for Language Teachers” is the name of the grammar course. At Carleton, the grammar course is called “Major Structures”. It is interesting that although the study of English grammar could be expected in a course on teaching English language, neither Carleton nor Deakin used the word “grammar” in the course designed to teach it. In order to know that it is a course on grammar, the course description needs to be read, and even then, it may not be clear that the course is primarily concerned with English grammar. Grammar courses for language teachers at universities usually show grammar as a description of how a language works (descriptive grammar) as opposed to a set of rules to be memorized (prescriptive rules). The grammar that students in language classes learn is a simplified version of general rules that help someone communicate in the language (pedagogical grammar). Different people with different ideas of what language actually is and where it comes from have very different ways of describing it.

I will use the Deakin “Linguistics for Language Teachers” as a starting point for a number of reasons: the course descriptions for Deakin are designed for those who are off-campus as well as on-campus, and so the descriptions give more information than the Carleton CTESL course descriptions.

This is what the course description for Linguistics for Language teaching says:

### ***ECL753 - Linguistics for Language Teaching Content***

Knowledge of the target language is central to the expertise of a language teacher, its structure and functions, and how it is used in diverse contexts. Topics to be addressed in this unit include: approaches to the description of language for teaching purposes; language structure and language function; spoken and written language; meanings in discourse; the concept of genre and its application to language teaching; text and discourse analysis for teaching purposes; formation and meanings of words, and teaching and learning vocabulary; the study of syntax, morphology and phonology; spelling systems; the teaching of linguistic features in context; inductive and deductive approaches to grammar teaching; and analysis of spoken and written learner interlanguage for diagnostic and teaching purposes. (2009 Deakin Units pp. 243 – 244)

Based on this description, it seems quite similar to Carleton’s “Introduction to Linguistics” course, which is described below:

### ***Linguistics and Applied Language Studies 29.100 Introduction to Linguistics***

Elementary principles and methods of descriptive analysis of language; phonetics; phonology; morphology; syntax. Survey of other areas of linguistics: historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, semantics, applied linguistics. (Carleton University: Sixtieth Annual Undergraduate Calendar p. 373)

For someone without a background in linguistics, the courses may look similar because both mention syntax, morphology and phonology- all terms that are not likely to be known. However, in reality, the Carleton course spends quite a while covering these items, whereas the Deakin Linguistics for Language Teacher course goes over them quite briefly and the bulk of the course is sentential level grammar. There is a section on grammar in the Carleton course, but it is not longer, nor given any more weight, than any of the other areas in the course description. At the end of the course, Deakin’s Linguistics for Language Teachers goes into discourse level language, and many students will go on to take a course on discourse analysis. The Carleton Introduction to Linguistics course ends with reconstructing dead languages, an area not covered at all in Deakin’s program. In short, Linguistics for Language Teachers is a course on English grammar. Introduction to Linguistics is not.

The required course in grammar for the CTESL is Major Structures of English (obviously relating to ‘structural grammar- the approach taken in the formalist tradition). A description of the CTESL Major Structures of English is:

### ***Linguistics and Applied Language Studies 29.481 \* Major Structures of English***

This course is intended to familiarize students with the structure of the English language, highlighting important contrasts between English and other languages as well as grammatical difficulties for ESL learners. (Carleton University: Sixtieth Annual Undergraduate Calendar p. 315)

Whereas the Deakin course leads the student to studying discourse analysis as a natural follow-up, Carleton’s grammar course could be viewed more as an amplification of the syntax part of the Intensive Introduction to Linguistics. Other courses in Carleton’s CTESL likewise seem like amplifications of the material covered in Introduction to Linguistics. This is important because it shows that rather than stressing the “teaching” part of the CTESL (Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Second Language), it focuses on areas related to the second language acquisition of English. This is perhaps to be expected given that the program is housed in the Linguistics Department, and not a Faculty of Education. It may also be possible to say that the CTESL student-teacher at Carleton will approach the study of English grammar with a more thorough understanding of grammatical concepts divorced from the English language and therefore more ready to apply these

concepts to other languages or view them from the perspective of students trying to learn English grammatical concepts than Deakin's MTESOL students because the majority of CTESL students take the survey of theoretical linguistics with the Introduction to Linguistics course concurrently with the Major Structures. In both programs, courses complement each other giving the learner a stronger overall understanding of the area than a single course alone. It is interesting that the 'area' that is covered is defined by the tradition of the program (either formalist or functionalist) with little mention of the other tradition.

## Conclusion

Both formalist schools and functionalist schools eventually cover similar territory, preparing people to be English language teachers, but do so in entirely different ways. The formalist tradition generally treats sociolinguistics as a sidebar to the teaching of language, the functionalist tradition does the same with most of the areas other than sociolinguistics that are studied in surveys of linguistics. For example, language families of the world, particularly Indo-European language families are often studied as a starting point of historical linguistics in the formalist tradition by studying charts of related languages and noticing the manner in which different language families tend to be grouped together on the map (most of the Slavic languages are in Eastern Europe, most of the Romance and Germanic languages are in Western Europe). Language families in the functionalist tradition are covered within sociolinguistics courses by pointing out a gradual shift in languages across space rather than isolated points on a graph. For example, when we think of "Italian" we are thinking of the language as spoken in Rome, but the manner in which it is spoken near to the French border will have many similarities with the manner in which French is spoken at the border with Italy. Both traditions teach the concept of "language family", but in entirely different ways.

Universities in English speaking countries often hire ESL teachers from amongst their own graduates, and so these universities need to ensure that graduates are trained to work at their institution. The reality is that both functionalist and formalist traditions are valid, and universities have to cover a huge amount of material in a short amount of time. University program designers have to think about norms for their geographic area, as well as ensuring that course takers have a sufficient depth of knowledge to work elsewhere. To try to cover both traditions equally within the same degree would mean either expanding the program length until it was much longer (and therefore more expensive and consequentially a less attractive product to potential customers) and probably confusing for students who would then be learning to view language and language teaching in two different ways simultaneously. Or the depth of study would be lessened, and graduates would take away a fairly superficial overview of the two different systems. Neither situation would be desirable.

In conclusion, it is not easy for someone choosing a graduate course in language teaching to understand what the similarities and differences are between courses just by reading course descriptions and comparing programs. The manner in

which the programs are described may make programs that are in reality extremely different seem very similar. The amount of unfamiliar terms in language teacher training makes it all the more confusing. Just knowing the differences between the formalist and functionalist traditions could help these people. For some people, a program in the formalist tradition may seem a natural progression from their undergraduate study for example, if they majored in a foreign language, psychology or even a science. For others, a program in the functionalist tradition may seem a natural progression if they majored in English literature, the history of one of the fine arts, or communications. In order to choose between a formalist and a functionalist program, it would likely be necessary to investigate programs in different countries. Other than people doing an off-campus program (probably likely while based in a country where English is not spoken), the majority of people from inner-circle English speaking countries will probably choose to do a program in their own country.

For universities, the mixture of traditions in language teaching through the hiring of both people with formalist and people with functionalist training has the potential to greatly benefit everyone involved in language teaching. People coming from the formalist tradition are steeped in linguistics as a field. They learn about language families and therefore language change from the perspective of vast lengths of time. This kind of focus may be looked at as having similarities with quantitative research. They can list language families, and languages within individual families. What is not considered part of the core, however, is an understanding of differences in speech between different speakers of a single language and relating it to very complex cultures and the inter-cultures of language users. Sociolinguistics, the focus of the functionalist tradition, tends to focus on small groups and analyze differences between speakers within a single language, and bares similarities to qualitative research. Each tradition is like a culture- they are looking at the same thing (language and how to teach it) in a different way. Both of these traditions working together in a single university is a kind of occupational intercultural communications- with all the benefits and power relation issues inherent in any meeting of different cultures. Language teachers themselves come from a variety of backgrounds, academically, geographically and culturally. A person's identity as a language teacher is also affected by the professional training that they had.

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