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Crowdsourcing research topics to raise public understanding of applied linguistics

Richard Watson Todd¹

¹ King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

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Abstract

Applied linguistics as a discipline has poor public recognition both among the general public and within universities. While there are many laudable initiatives to promote specific research projects, little attention has been paid to raising public understanding of applied linguistics as a field. Crowdsourcing in the form of an idea competition to elicit research topics in applied linguistics has potential to solve poor public understanding of the field. This paper describes an idea competition run at a Thai university eliciting 27 submissions which can act as a model for further attempts to raise public understanding of applied linguistics.

The public profile of applied linguistics

Applied linguistics (AL) has poor public recognition. In 2004, Vivian Cook wrote, “If you tell someone you’re an applied linguist, they look at you with bafflement”; little has changed since then. While the general public has a rough idea of what, say, an archaeologist or an anthropologist does, when you tell someone that you are an applied linguist, a common reaction is that you must speak many languages (Price, 2018). There is clearly a lack of understanding on the part of the general public of the nature and role of AL.

One reason for the paucity of public understanding of AL is that it is difficult to explain to a layperson what the discipline of AL does. Traditional definitions are not particularly helpful. The most cited definition of AL is “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (Brumfit, 1995: 27), but, as Myers (2005: 527) points out, “it is hard to think of any “real-world” problems ... that do not have a crucial component of language use” leaving the non-aficionado still at a loss. A more effective approach may be to use an ostensive definition by citing examples of AL research as the British Association for Applied Linguistics does on its website.

A second reason is that AL has become increasingly interdisciplinary drawing on theories and practices from a wide range of other disciplines. On the one hand, this makes it difficult to distinguish AL from the other academic disciplines with which it is enmeshed; on the other, the case can be made that AL has become so fragmented that it should not be considered a single discipline any more (Cook, 2015).

However AL should be defined, whatever other disciplines research draws from, and irrespective of whether AL can still be considered a unitary discipline, applied linguists have a vested interest in AL being broadly acknowledged as a valid and valuable enterprise. For this to happen, greater public understanding of AL can only help.

These arguments about perceptions of AL within general society also apply to the place of AL within universities. Few universities have a dedicated department for AL and there is little consistency across universities for where applied linguists should be housed (Conrad et al., 2021). Perhaps as a consequence AL staff at universities often have a lower profile than staff of other better-known disciplines (Farmer et al., 2011). In parallel to the need for greater public understanding of AL, there is also a need to raise the profile of AL within universities.

Engaging the public with applied linguistics research

Relatively recent shifts in the administration of academia, such as the emphasis on research impact (McIntyre and Price 2018), have stimulated academics including AL researchers to engage the public with their research. For AL, this engagement might be categorized into three types. First, the most common type of public engagement is PR work promoting published research studies. Such PR work is usually concerned with specific research studies. Second, there are some more wide-ranging blogs covering a variety of topics in AL, such as the Language Matters! blog. It seems likely that most readers of such blogs are already broadly aware of AL. Third, non-academic stakeholders may be involved in conducting AL research (Price, 2018), often as a requirement of funding or to draw on their expertise. In most cases, such non-academic involvement is limited to a small group of people. One research approach where a broad section of the public can become involved in AL research is when the data is crowdsourced. For example, the word associations in the Small World of Words database were crowdsourced through a website (De Deyne et al. 2019).

While all of these approaches are laudable and valuable, the extent to which they can introduce the general public to the broad discipline of AL is unclear. What the discipline needs is ways of promoting broad understandings of AL to the general public who are not already familiar with the field. Of the approaches to public engagement, the one with the widest potential reach is crowdsourcing. In this article I will describe a crowdsourcing project which aimed to raise recognition of AL within a university as a model for future projects to raise the profile of AL.

Crowdsourcing for public engagement

Crowdsourcing requests fall into two types (Ghezzi et al. 2018): innovation problems and micro-tasks. The vast majority of language research crowdsourcing, including the elicitation of word associations, involves micro-tasks where each participant completes a small well-defined task requiring no special skills. In business, however, there has been a lot of interest in and use of innovation problems especially through idea competitions, perhaps best-known through the Netflix Prize. The explicit goal of an idea competition is for a company to acquire an innovation but other benefits include improved intelligence (e.g., knowledge of the market) and public relations. Indeed, studies have shown that companies may gain more from these secondary benefits than directly from innovation acquisition (Mortara et al. 2014). The fact that

public relations may be the greatest benefit from running an idea competition makes this approach particularly appropriate for raising public understanding of AL.

In setting the main goal of an idea competition as raising public understanding, the competition should be designed to draw as wide an audience as possible. The competition should therefore be accessible, require little input from entrants, and not require specialist skills. This rules out traditional business-oriented idea competitions for innovation acquisition such as coding a natural language processing application. Instead, characteristics common to much AL research could be used as the basis for the competition. Much AL research is broadly comprehensible to the general public and, especially when addressing key social issues, has inherent interest. Asking the public to propose social issues of concern which could be addressed through AL research should be attractive. In other words, the idea competition should elicit research topics where the analysis of language can shed light on a social issue.

While the main purpose of the idea competition is to raise the profile of AL, there are other potential benefits. First, the responses to the competition provide improved intelligence about social issues of concern to the public. Second, by creating a broad base of people contributing research ideas, the range of possible research ideas becomes more diverse allowing otherwise unconsidered research topics to become available through crowdsourced intuiting (Schlagwein and Bjørn-Andersen 2014). Third, since the competition winner is likely to be interested and active (e.g., through social media) in the area proposed, the applied linguists who conduct the proposed research gain a potential partner (McEnergy 2018).

Raising the research profile of applied linguistics within a university

Since, as far as I am aware, no-one has previously run a crowdsourcing project to raise public understanding of an academic discipline, I decided to start small. As we have seen, public recognition of AL is poor both within society generally and within universities. Running an idea competition to elicit AL research topics within my own university appeared manageable.

Working in the School of Liberal Arts (SoLA) at a Thai technological university with a heavy emphasis on engineering presents a range of challenges. Although we have our own Masters and doctoral programmes and a good reputation for research within the AL community in Thailand, for the vast majority of students and staff at the university SoLA is simply the provider of language and general education courses with staff perceived as being classroom teachers, not well-rounded academics. On the plus side, SoLA does host an officially recognized research group, the Text Analysis Research Group (TARG) which conducts research in corpus linguistics, text linguistics and discourse analysis. Much of the research of TARG focuses on social issues and is readily comprehensible at a broad level to the general public. The accessibility of this research means that we could use the TARG work as the basis for raising the research profile of SoLA.

Having decided to run an idea competition to elicit broad research topics within the area of text analysis and with a focus on social issues, we drew on the useful guidance for designing idea competitions of Mortara et al. (2014). To illustrate

potential research topics, we provided several examples as an ostensive definition of AL similar to the BAAL website; we offered a small monetary reward for the winner to attract attention; and we created an online form keeping submission requirements to a minimum for entrants. The competition details and application form can be found at <https://targ.kmutt.ac.th/targ/?p=1219>. We used the university's internal PR system and held an event for undergraduate students to promote the competition.

Initial interest in the competition was promising. Around 30 people (predominantly undergraduate students from engineering faculties) attended the event we arranged with many staying late into the evening to gain a better understanding of AL; the university's PR postings were reshared within faculties; and at least 13 student groups shared and discussed the competition on their Facebook pages. In total, we received 27 submissions from a range of university members (10 undergraduate students, 11 postgraduate students, 3 academic staff, and 3 support staff) affiliated with a range of different units in the university on a range of topics. A few were impractical (e.g. the role of creativity in dealing with natural disasters), but most were appropriate and several had clear research potential (e.g., a comparison of how cosmetics adverts in Thailand and the West portray beauty, and a case study of how online trolling can shift so that the 'troller' becomes the 'trolleed'). The winning entry focused on public views on the ethics and impact of AI-generated art (e.g. Midjourney) and was submitted by an undergraduate student of civil engineering. We are currently creating a research plan on the topic.

Raising public understanding of applied linguistics more broadly

While it is too early to evaluate whether the idea competition has changed perceptions of SoLA within the university, the wide sharing of the competition, the interest shown by engineering undergraduates at the event, and the submission of several valid and interesting research topics suggest that crowdsourcing research topics may be one route to raising public understanding of AL. To reinforce any shifts in perceptions, we intend to run the idea competition annually.

The potential impact of the idea competition on public understanding of AL within the university suggests that crowdsourcing research topics could be applied more widely. In common with most countries, AL has low public recognition in Thailand. To raise the profile of the discipline, the Thai Association for Applied Linguistics (whose mission statement includes "facilitating greater public recognition and understanding of the field") is currently exploring the possibility of running an idea competition similar to the one described in this paper at a national level with the whole Thai population eligible to submit entries.

In a world where public awareness is becoming increasingly influential, applied linguists need to attempt to engage the public more with their research. Disseminating interesting studies more widely helps, but for broad impact greater public understanding of the whole field of AL is needed. Crowdsourcing through idea competitions is one potentially valuable approach, and I look forward to other innovative solutions to raising public understanding of applied linguistics.

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