**Ideas for M.A. Thesis Topics from Susan Conrad**
(9/16/08 version)

The number of potential thesis topics is limitless.  Here I've listed just a few ideas related to my favorite areas  - grammar, corpus linguistics, and writing.

---

**Reminders about doing a thesis**
1.  A thesis is a research study.  A thesis can study the effectiveness of teaching materials, include sample teaching materials to illustrate applications of the research, or provide empirical support for a teaching or curriculum issue in a real program.  However, if you primarily want to develop teaching materials for your Culminating Experience, you should do an M.A. *project* rather than a thesis.
2.  I have listed general topics here, but every thesis needs a narrow focus within the general topic.  Think small.
3.  Besides a narrow focus, you will need a clearly stated, answerable research question, and a study design that will allow you to answer the question.
4.  You need to get necessary background so that you are prepared to do a thesis in your area of interest.  This might mean taking an extra elective course or a course in another department. Whatever topic you are interested in, ask potential thesis advisors what background courses you need.

**Always a good idea for a thesis:  replication / modification studies**
Modify a study that captured your interest when you read it.  For example, maybe you wonder if you would get the same results with the specific student population you will work with, so your thesis uses the same design with a different population.  Maybe you think the researchers of the original study had a flaw in their design, so you change the design slightly for your thesis.  Maybe you think it's time for a quantitative study after the original study was only qualitative. Replication/modification studies are useful for the field and often go more smoothly than entirely new study ideas because the original study is like a pilot study for your work!

---

**TOPIC AREAS**

1) If you are especially interested in GRAMMAR TEACHING
- analyze inductive vs deductive teaching of a grammar point (students' affective reaction or differences in effectiveness)
- investigate students' reaction to receptive tasks (rather than productive tasks)
- compare the effectiveness of (a specific type of) focus-on-form instruction vs traditional instruction
- analyze the use of corpus-based grammar materials (Many issues need further study: How do students react? Is there any difference in students' output with these vs traditional materials?  etc,)
- investigate ways that teachers incorporate a focus on form into communicative lessons (an analysis of teaching practices)

- conduct an "error gravity" study for the particular audience your learners are preparing for (What types of errors are considered most serious by the target audience?)
- use concordancing to teach students to be their own grammar analysts and evaluate the successfulness (see M. Jipping's thesis)
- assess a small group of textbooks relative to some clearly stated criteria (such as consistency with target-speaker use or inclusion of a discourse context for grammar)
- analyze the effectiveness of a communicative activity for practicing a structure (ask me for F. Van Acker's thesis from Iowa State for a good example of this)
- analyze the use of grammatical features across contexts and groups (useful especially for a feature you had trouble teaching in the past)
- and many others.

*Courses to take in addition to the program requirements*:  Grammar for TESOL, Corpus Linguistics in Language Teaching (if you will use a corpus approach), Curriculum Design & Materials Development (if you will assess materials or curricula)


2) If you are interested in **GRAMMAR AND TEACHER TRAINING**
- analyze the Dept of Applied Linguistics' Grammar Prerequisite Test (e.g. conducting item discrimination, among other things)

*Courses to take in addition to the program requirements*:  Language Assessment, Grammar for TESOL


3) If you are especially interested in **CORPUS LINGUISTICS**
- study students' use of concordancing and their ability to apply the techniques to their own new searches (see J. Pieterick's thesis)
- collect papers from a particular department to include in the PSU Corpus of Student Academic Writing (aka PSU C-SAW and "The Viking Corpus") and analyze some aspect of student writing (see ideas in next section)
- continue the analysis of the best design for the PSU C-SAW (see ideas in L. Spitzer's thesis)
- study teacher and student use of popular concordancing programs, assessing the design of the programs (especially useful if you want to develop your own corpus-related programs later)
- analyze teacher reaction to or use of corpus linguistics techniques (see theses by A. Gardes and E. Lachenmeier)

*Courses to take in addition to the program requirements*:  Corpus Linguistics in Language Teaching, Grammar for TESOL (if you will do a grammar-related study)

4) If you are especially interested in **WRITING**
- analyze some aspect of  IELP (or other learner) writing vs regular university student writing in the PSU Corpus of Student Academic Writing (C-SAW)
- analyze the grammatical structures in different types of assignments in the PSU C-SAW (e.g. library research papers vs empirical research)

- analyze the language elicited by the writing assignments used at different levels in the IELP (or another program) and its correspondence with the grammar curriculum
- analyze IELP student writing vs similar types of writing in the PSU C-SAW (e.g. descriptions, self-reflections, etc.)
- add a piece to my project to analyze the writing of practicing civil engineers compared with the writing done by civil engineering students (you can have a grammatical or rhetorical focus, or some combination, for your study)
- conduct rhetorical/genre analyses comparing two genres within a field, or the same genre in different fields (see M. Poff's thesis for an example).

*Courses to take in addition to the program requirements*:  Discourse Analysis, Grammar for TESOL (if you will study a grammatical feature)