Launching a New Initiative: A Living Database of Research Syntheses in Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

This editorial marks the launch of a new initiative to create a continuously updated, open-access database of research syntheses in applied linguistics. Designed as a living resource, the database aims to advance the knowledge base of applied linguistics as an evolving field of study, and to make it easier for researchers, educators, and policymakers to locate relevant and up-to-date evidence to inform research, practice and policy making. Searches are to be conducted across four major databases, Scopus, Web of Science, APA PsycINFO, and EBSCO, using a combination of language-related and synthesis-related search terms. Identified research syntheses will be screened based on carefully designed inclusion/exclusion criteria, categorised by review type and research topic, and summarised in a concise and accessible format. Methodological systematicity, transparency, and reporting clarity will be mapped using the SMART framework. The database will be updated periodically on EPPI Reviewer and displayed as an open-access website using EPPI Visualiser, with each cycle accompanied by a bibliographic meta-review.

Key words: Living review, research synthesis; applied linguistics; SMART, meta-review; EPPI Reviewer

1. Background

Research synthesis (RS) has attracted increasing attention in applied linguistics as a method to systematically synthesise findings across studies, inform practice, and shape future research agenda. A recent meta-review commissioned by the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) (Chong, Nie, & Liu, 2025) found that 77.76% of the 1,736 included RS were published in or after 2020. Distinct from traditional literature reviews, RS such as systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and meta-analyses are characterised by transparent, replicable methods for literature identification, selection, analysis, and reporting (Chong & Plonsky, 2024; Cooper, 2017; Norris & Ortega, 2006). With its underlying features of transparency, comprehensiveness and systematicity (Plonsky, Isaacs, & Taylor, 2025), RS has the potential to streamline the conceptual and methodological complexity of applied linguistics, a diverse field that covers language acquisition,

multilingualism, language policy, and many more. However, despite the growing number of RS in applied linguistics, much of this work remains fragmented across subfields, which makes it difficult for researchers, educators, and policymakers to view recent developments comprehensively.

Led by the RSAL Journal's Bibliography Editors, this new initiative is to systematically index and summarise RS in applied linguistics. It is designed as a companion effort to the BAAL-commissioned meta-review, which aims to map the research landscape of applied linguistics through a synthesis of published reviews up to early 2025 (Chong, Nie, & Liu, 2025). Building on the BAAL meta-review, this initiative responds to the clear need for a regularly updated work to catalogue and track new RS in the field. By offering a snapshot of current synthesis activities periodically and an infrastructure for ongoing updates, this initiative seeks to strengthen the evidence base of applied linguistics and foster a more connected and informed research community.

2. Approaches

2.1 Data Search

We draw on a structured search and screening procedure inherited from the protocol used by the BAAL meta-review (Chong, Nie, & Liu, 2025), with modifications in scope and timeframe. A comprehensive search will be conductedd semiannually (every six months) across four major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, APA PsycINFO, and EBSCO. The search terms, developed in consultation with the BAAL executive committee, are designed to capture both the linguistic focus and the review type, and will be applied to the Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields.

The linguistic search string is:

(languag OR "language learn*" OR "language teach*" OR "language acquisition" OR literac* OR English* OR sociolinguistic* OR psycholinguistic* OR discourse OR multilingual* OR bilingual* OR "intercultural communication" OR translat* OR "language test*" OR "language assess*" OR TESOL OR "gender stud*" OR pluralingual* OR monolingual* OR "cultural stud*" OR "translanguag*")*

The review-type search string is:

("systematic review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "scoping review" OR "methodological review" OR "methodological synthesis" OR "systematic literature review" OR "research synthesis" OR "evidence synthesis" OR "meta-synthesis" OR "state-of-the-art review")

In addition, the term linguistic* will be used in all fields to ensure relevance to the field.

2.2 Data Screening

To be considered an RS, a review needs to be guided by research questions or objectives, apply explicit and systematic methods to search the literature, gather information from studies, and interpret the evidence (Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2019). Consistent with the conceptualisation in Chong, Nie, and Liu (2025), this living database initiative adopts the definition of applied linguistics as "the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (Brumfit, 1995, p. 27). Grounded in this framing, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria, with feedback from BAAL, is developed to guide the screening process.

Studies will be included if they:

- *Are published within the specified cycle (e.g., January to June 2025 for the first cycle);*
- *Have the full-text available;*
- *Are written in English;*
- *Are peer-reviewed;*
- *Report a RS (e.g., systematic review, scoping review, meta-analysis);*
- *Have language as a main focus of inquiry (e.g., investigate human language-related topics in educational, social, cultural, or professional contexts, or examine applied linguistics research through methodological lens).*

Studies will be excluded if they:

- *Are published outside of the cycle;*
- *Do not have the full-text available;*
- *Are written in a language other than English;*
- *Are not peer-reviewed;*
- *Do not report a RS;*
- *Are not within the scope of applied linguistics as defined above (e.g., focus on theoretical linguistics without a real-world application; address machine language or natural language processing without clear links to human language learning or use; or treat language solely as a demographic descriptor, control variable, or peripheral factor in research focused on other topics).*

The retrieved records from the databases will be imported into EPPI Reviewer, a web-based tool developed by the EPPI-Centre at University College London for conducting RS, including workflow management, deduplication, screening, data extraction and methodological appraisal (Thomas et al., 2022). A publication year filter will be applied to search for RS published in the designated cycle only. However, to address the

issue of inaccurate index in databases, a subsequent manual check will be conducted prior to the start of the screening process. The search and screening process will follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). After deduplication, all remaining items will undergo two stages of screening at the title/abstract level and the full-text level, following the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Records meeting all inclusion criteria will be included in the database for categorisation, summarisation, and methodological appraisal. To enhance the reliability of screening decisions, a dual-screening process will be applied to 10% of the records during both the title/abstract and full-text screening stages. Inter-rater reliability between the two reviewers will be calculated and reported using both percentage agreement and Cohen's Kappa, and disagreements will be resolved through discussion to reach consensus.

2.3 Data Extraction

As the objective of this project is not to synthesise substantive findings, only review types and themes (categories and topics) will be extracted for the purpose of grouping. The classification of review types in this review is primarily informed by Chong and Plonsky (2024), who approached the typology of secondary research in applied linguistics in a systematic manner. Eight categories will be used: systematic (literature) review, scoping review, methodological review, state-of-the-art review, meta-analysis, bibliometric review, rapid review, and meta-review. In parallel, a two-level thematic coding scheme will be applied. RS will be first classified into broad categories (Figure 1) and then tagged with more specific topics (Table 1) to map the overall structure of applied linguistics and to capture the current distribution of research topics within the field.

At the first level, a categorical framework is developed to depict applied linguistics as an evolving field of study (Figure 1). This framework draws on the view that applied linguistics entails the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world issues in which language is a primary concern (Brumfit, 1995; Cambridge University Press, 2009), and is informed by the pooled experience of the BAAL meta-review team, who screened over 10,000 records (Chong, Nie, & Liu, 2025). It is also shaped by the feedback and advice from the BAAL Executive Committee, the international advisory board of the BAAL meta-review, and the editors-in-chief of the Research Synthesis in Applied Linguistics journal. Moreover, it resonates to some extent with an unpublished framework developed by Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez and her team, as we were aware through email communication (M. Fuertes Gutiérrez, personal communication, September 10, 2025). Nine categories are established: *language pedagogy, language acquisition, language assessment, instrumental use of language, interactional use of language, representational use of language, language-related construct, technology in applied linguistics, and applied linguistics meta-research.* In the interest of transparency, it is worth noting that the *language development* component resonates to some extent with an unpublished

framework developed by Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez and her team, which we became aware of through email communication (M. Fuertes Gutiérrez, personal communication, September 10, 2025).

As shown in Figure 1, three categories fall under *language development*, and four under *language use*. Under the theme of *language development*, there are *language pedagogy*, *language acquisition*, and *language assessment*. *Language pedagogy* refers to how teachers teach languages. It encompasses instructional methods, teaching strategies, classroom practices, curriculum and syllabus design, teacher education and professional development, and teacher perceptions. *Language acquisition* refers to how learners learn languages. It covers language acquisition in both naturalistic and instructed contexts and includes cognitive, affective, and psychological dimensions of language learning, such as motivation, learner beliefs, aptitude, and individual differences that influence acquisition processes. *Language asssessment* is the evaluation of learners' language knowledge and skills in diverse contexts, including standardised proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS), formative and summative assessments, feedback and dynamic assessment. It also encompasses the validity and reliability of assessment instruments, as well as the broader washback effects and impact of testing on language teaching and learning.

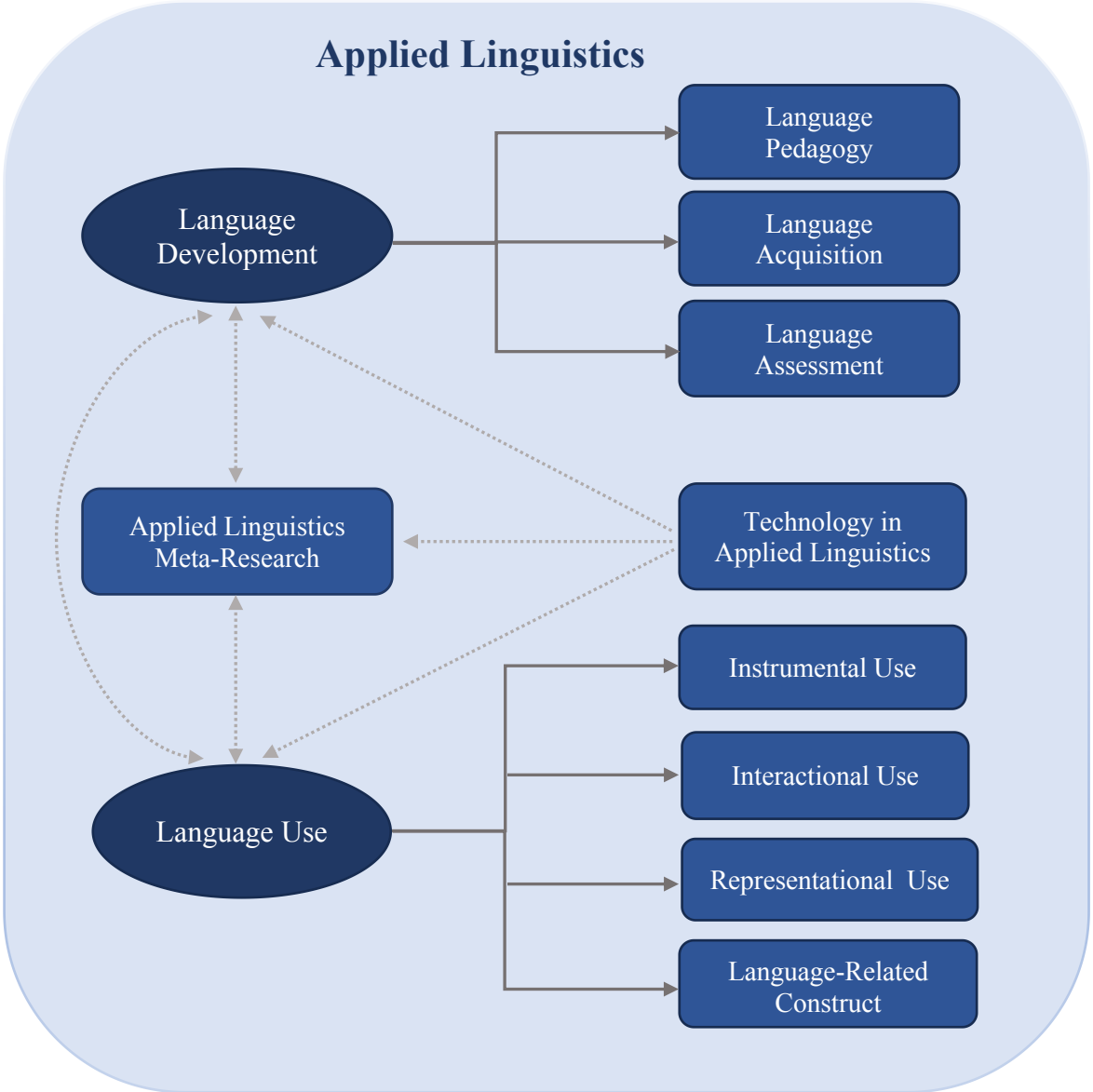

Figure 1: Categories in applied linguistics

The four categories under *language use* are the *instrumental*, *interactional*, and *representational use* of language, as well as *language-related construct*. *Instrumental use of language* refers the study of how language is used as a tool to achieve practical and specific goals within academic and professional fields, such as education, healthcare, law, and business. *Interactional use of language*, on the other hand, is the analysis of how language constructs, conveys, and negotiates meaning in interactive and communicative settings. It encompasses areas such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, genre analysis, and intercultural communication. *Representational use of language* is the study of language as a medium for social and cultural construction, like identity, ideology, and power. Sociolinguistics, for example, falls in this category, as it covers social factors that shape language variation and change, language and identity, language policy, and language ideologies. *Language-related construct* concerns the exploration of relationships between language and other cognitive, academic, or affective constructs, including links between language proficiency and abilities such as mathematical reasoning, scientific literacy, creativity, problem-solving, executive function, and social-emotional skills.

Technology in applied linguistics and *applied linguistics meta-research* intersect with all the categories above, and with each other. *Technology in applied linguistics* is the examination of how digital innovations shape language teaching, learning, assessment, use, and research, including areas such as AR/VR augmented language learning, AI-driven feedback or assessment, intelligent tutoring systems, and speech and text technologies. *Applied linguistics meta-research*, as its name indicates, refers to the investigation of how applied linguistics research is conducted and evaluated. It covers methodological trends (e.g. research design, data collection, analytical methods), reporting practices, participant demographics, or tools used. It also includes meta-level discussions on the development, identity, scope, or theoretical underpinnings of applied linguistics as a field of study or subfields under applied linguistics.

At the secondary level, a list of topics will be used to represent well-established subfields of applied linguistics (Table 1). This list is informed by the names of the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) of BAAL, the research specialisms identified in the Big Survey Report of BAAL 55th Anniversary (BAAL, 2024), and the areas of research of the Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies (OASLS) database (Marsden et al., 2018). Other reference points include topic frameworks used by major applied linguistics associations, conference themes, and thematic taxonomies in leading journals, and suggestions from the international advisory board of the BAAL Meta-Review. We understand that these topics address applied linguistics from different dimensions (e.g., linguistic background, function, methodology), they often interact with each other in complex ways, and there may be overlaps and gaps. For example, ESP, EMI, CLT, TBLT can be fully or

partly covered by TESOL. The intention is to reflect the research landscape of applied linguistics as it currently stands. It is important to note that the list of topics is not intended to be exhaustive and will remain living. As indexing and summarising progress, additional topics may be added and existing topics may be merged and renamed. We welcome comments and suggestions regarding possible inclusions or revisions.

Number	Topics
1	Applied Phonetics and Phonology
2	Applied Psycholinguistics
3	Bilingualism and Multilingualism
4	Child Language Development
5	Clinical Linguistics
6	Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)
7	Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)
8	Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)
9	Corpus Linguistics
10	Curriculum and Syllabus Design in Language Education
11	Discourse Analysis
12	English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)
13	English for Specific Purposes (ESP)
14	Forensic Linguistics
15	Heritage Languages
16	Indigenous Languages
17	Intercultural Communication
18	Language Policy and Planning
19	Language Teacher Education
20	Language Testing and Assessment
21	Literacy and Multiliteracies
22	Multimodal Communication
23	Pragmatics

24	Professional Communication
25	Queer Linguistics
26	Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
27	Sociolinguistics
28	Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)
29	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
30	Translanguaging
31	Translation and Interpreting Studies
32	World Englishes

Table 1: Topics in Applied Linguistics

Each included RS will be coded into one or more categories in Figure 1 based on its primary focus of investigation and tagged with the relevant topic(s). For example, an article about the integration of digital technology in classroom language teaching may be coded under *technology in applied linguistics* and *language pedagogy* in the first level and will be tagged with *CALL* in the second level. Allowing more than one category or topic acknowledges that many RS address multiple dimensions of applied linguistics or concerns topics that cut across established subfields.

2.4 Methodological Appraisal

The SMART framework is then used to gather methodological information of the included RS. It is important to note that SMART is not intended to evaluate or judge the quality or contribution of a synthesis. Instead, it focuses specially on the extent to which each RS demonstrates systematicity, transparency, accessibility, and reflexivity (Chong, 2025), based solely on the information reported. Therefore, an RS may be methodologically robust in its implementation but may not be reflected as such in SMART if key components like database search strings or inter-coder reliability are not clearly reported. For this living database and the accompanying bibliographic meta-reviews, SMART is used to capture the methodological transparency and reporting clarity through its seven method items (M1 to M7). The purpose is to identify field-wide patterns and inform future RS practices.

For easier application, we break each method item down into observable checkpoints (see Table 2). If all checkpoints for an item are met, the review receives a full score of 1 point. If only some checkpoints are fulfilled, a score of 0.5 is assigned. Items deemed not applicable to a particular review type (e.g. study appraisal does not apply to scoping reviews) receive a full point to ensure fair treatment across different review

types. The overall score is then calculated by summing the points across all seven dimensions. To ensure consistency and reliability in data extraction and appraisal, a dual-review process will be applied to 10% of the included RS. All disagreements will be resolved through discussion between the two bibliography editors.

Method Items	SMART Guiding Questions	Observable Checkpoints
M1 Research Questions (RQ)	- Have you included the research questions? - Have you reviewed the alignment between research questions and RS type? *(optional)*	One checkpoint: 1) Include research questions or explicitly stated the specific purpose of the review
M2 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria (IE)	- Have you included the specific criteria to inform study selection? - Have you included the rationale of the criteria? *(optional)*	One checkpoint: 1) Include specific inclusion/exclusion criteria
M3 Search Strategies (SS)	- Have you included all the databases (min. of 3) and the search strings used? - Have you included the rationale for choosing the databases and search strings? *(optional)*	Two checkpoints: 1) Include at least 3 databases 2) Include full search strings with Boolean operators (not just a list of keywords)
M4 Screening (SC)	- Have you conducted first-level screening on titles and abstracts? - Have you conducted second-level screening on full-texts? - Have you calculated inter-coder reliability? - Have you documented the processes and any issues that arose and solutions? *(optional)*	Three checkpoints: 1) Mention title/abstract screening 2) Mention full-text screening 3) Provide exact inter-coder reliability
M5 Data Extraction (DE)	- Have you developed and piloted the data extraction form? - Have you calculated inter-coder reliability? - Have you documented the processes and any issues that arose and solutions? *(optional)*	Three checkpoints: 1) Develop a data extraction form or coding scheme 2) Pilot the data extraction form or coding scheme 3) Calculate inter-coder reliability
M6 Appraisal (AP)	- Have you evaluated the methodological rigour of included studies using existing tools/checklists (if applicable)? - Have you documented the processes and any issues that arose and solutions? *(optional)*	One checkpoint: 1) Use existing/adapted tools/checklists to appraise methodological quality

M7 Data Synthesis (DS)	- Have you identified an approach or method for analysising and interpretating the extracted data? - Have you used any software or automation tools (*optional*)? - Have you calculated inter-coder reliability? *(not applicable for meta-analysis)* - Have you documented the processes and any issues arose and solutions? *(optional)*	Two checkpoints: 1) Explicitly state an analysis or synthesis approach 2) Explicitly mention resolving inter-coder disagreement

Table 2: The SMART Framework Questions and Checkpoints (adapted from Chong, 2025)

3. Result Presentation

3.1 The Living RS Database

The categorised and tagged RS will be hosted on the EPPI Visualiser platform, which will be made freely accessible to the public as a website. This interactive interface will allow users to explore the database in ways that suit their own practical needs or research interests. For example, users will be able to view the list of RS associated with a given category or tagged topic, examine the frequency distribution of categories or topics, and generate visual summaries such as bar charts and pie charts. The crosstabulation function will enable users to explore relationships between different categories and topics and visualise them with bubble charts, which are useful for revealing intersections and patterns.

The two-level (category in Figure 1 and topic in Table 1) coding is designed to support this exploratory use. Through searches and visualisations across different dimensions, users can situate their own areas of specialisation within the broader landscape of applied linguistics. For example, a researcher interested in translanguaging could examine whether relevant RS are concentrated within the category of language development or language use, and compare these distributions with other topics. The intention is to provide not only a repository of RS, but also an analytical tool that encourages cross-pollination across subfields, fosters interdisciplinary dialogue, and highlights how language is positioned in different areas of inquiry.

Beyond supporting individual searches and visualisations, the database also offers opportunities to identify development trends in applied linguistics. For example, if a number of RS cluster within one category (e.g., *Language Use*) but do not align with any of the existing topics, this may signal the emergence of a new or evolving area of study. Tracking such patterns over continuously updated cycles can provide early indications of shifting priorities in the field. In this way, the database not only records the current state of applied linguistics research, but also acts as a tool for mapping its future directions.

3.2 Bibliographic Meta-Reviews

In addition to maintaining the living RS database, each updating cycle will conclude with a bibliographic meta-review. The review will address three core questions:

1) What types of RS have been published during this period?

2) What categories and topics in applied linguistics are covered?

3) To what extent do these RS demonstrate methodological systematicity, transparency, and reporting clarity under the SMART framework?

To answer these questions, a comprehensive analysis of the review types, thematic categories, and topics of the RS published during the updating cycle will be conducted to provide a snapshot of distribution and intersections within the field. In addition, a methodological appraisal will be conducted for each RS using the SMART framework and visualised through a seven-star system using the questions and checkpoints in Table 2. A solid gold star indicates that all checkpoints in a dimension are fully met; a hollow gold star indicates partial fulfilment; and a hollow grey star indicates the dimension is not met at all (see Table 3 for an example). To balance transparency with a non-evaluative focus on field-wide developments, individual appraisals will be compiled in full as an appendix link and will be open to comments and feedback from authors of included articles, and the main article will focus on summarising patterns and trends in methodological rigour of the included RS.

RS	Methodological Appraisal						
	RQ	IE	SS	SC	DE	AP	DS
In-text Citation	★	★	★	☆	★	☆	☆

Table 3: Example of Methodological Appraisal of included RS

4. Closing Remarks

By launching this living database and its accompanying bibliographic meta-reviews, we aim to create an infrastructure for accessing, mapping, and appraising RS in applied linguistics. Its success will depend on ongoing engagement from the research community, both in using the resource and in providing feedback to refine its scope, coding, and functionality. Over time, we hope this initiative will foster stronger connections between research and practice, enable more strategic use of evidence, and support a richer, more responsive applied linguistics research landscape.

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Author Contributions Statement

The following CRediT statement summarises contributions of the three authors on this work:

Dongxia Nie: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft preparation; Qi Liu: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing - Review and Editing; Sin-Wang Chong: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing - Review and Editing.

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Data Availability Statement

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