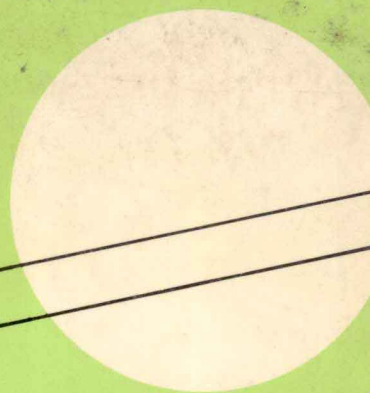


Explorations in  
Language Study



BRIAN HARRISON

**ENGLISH AS  
A SECOND  
AND FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE**

# **English as a Second and Foreign Language**



**Explorations in Language Study**  
*General Editors:*  
**Peter Doughty Geoffrey Thornton**

**ENGLISH AS A SECOND  
AND  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

**Brian Harrison**



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### **Explorations in Language Study**

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# General introduction

In the course of our efforts to develop a linguistic focus for work in English language, now published as *Language in Use*, we came to realise the extent of the growing interest in what we would call a linguistic approach to language. Lecturers in Colleges and Departments of Education see the relevance of such an approach in the education of teachers. Many teachers in schools and in colleges of Further Education see themselves that 'Educational failure is primarily *linguistic* failure', and have turned to Linguistic Science for some kind of exploration and practical guidance. Many of those now exploring the problems of relationships, community or society, from a sociological or psychological point of view wish to make use of a linguistic approach to the language in so far as it is relevant to these problems.

We were conscious of the wide divergence between the aims of the linguist, primarily interested in language as a system for organising 'meanings', and the needs of those who now wanted to gain access to the insights that resulted from that interest. In particular, we were aware of the wide gap that separated the literature of academic Linguistics from the majority of those who wished to find out what Linguistic Science might have to say about language and the use of language.

Out of this experience emerged our own view of that much-used term, 'Language Study', developed initially in the chapters of *Exploring Language*, and now given expression in this series. Language Study is not a subject, but a process, which is why the series is to be called *Explorations in Language Study*. Each exploration is focused upon a meeting point between the insights of Linguistic Science, often in conjunction with other social sciences, and the linguistic questions raised by the study of a particular aspect of individual behaviour or human society.

Initially, the volumes in the series have a particular relevance to the role of language in teaching and learning. The editors intend that they should make a basic contribution to the literature of Language Study, doing justice equally to the findings of the academic disciplines involved and the practical needs of those who now want to take a linguistic view of their own particular problems of language and the use of language.

Peter Doughty  
Geoffrey Thornton

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# Introduction

A major underlying theme of this series is the need for teachers and learners to be able to develop a linguistic perspective relevant to their needs as users of language, whether for living or for learning. Developing linguistic perspective is the process of learning how to see the significance of the many ways in which human beings use language for '... the expression of experience, including both the processes within and beyond the self—the phenomena of the external world and those of consciousness' (Halliday, *Explorations in the functions of language*, p. 99) and as '... a link in concerted human activity ...' (Malinowski). This is nowhere more important than in the context of teaching a language as a second or as a foreign language.

The major theme of this volume of the series is the need to create learning situations in which the non-native speaker can gain insight into how a particular language is used for living and learning, if he is ever to approximate to the 'communicative competence' that his teachers hope for. The emphasis is upon the 'real life situation' as the focus for operating effective language learning. Using, and therefore learning how to use, a language for living is a complex process involving a many-faceted relationship to actual situations of use as these occur in particular social contexts. It is for this reason that the teacher of a second or foreign language must be able to assess his drills, his programme of work, his learning aids, and even his choice of literary texts, from the stand-point of a linguistic perspective.

Properly, there has been a strong emphasis in recent years upon the spoken language in second and foreign language teaching. But which 'spoken language'? What ought the teacher to accept as a 'correct' form of spoken English? Where is the model for late-twentieth-century spoken English to be drawn from? The answer

has been given on so many occasions in terms of the native educated English speaker's folk-linguistic notions of what spoken English ought to *look* like, that is, his intuitive judgement of patterns of spoken text against the patterns of the one variety of written text which he happens to be most familiar with.

It is the function of linguistic perspective, and therefore the ultimate objective of exploring language in a Language Study context, to provide the means whereby such intuitive judgements are tested against an objective view of the nature and function of language. From this point of view, the only relevant model for spoken language is one which starts from the fact that speech arises through the interaction of participants in particular settings, pursuing particular ends. In other words, speech is social behaviour, and therefore learning what to say is as much a matter of 'learning how to mean' as it is a question of getting the structures right.

Perhaps the most significant point to make about a linguistic perspective, however, is the degree to which it supports a unified approach to language and language learning. What emerges from the first six chapters of this volume is a strong implication that there is no essential difference in the basic approach necessary for those who want to increase pupils' command of a language, whether they are engaged in foreign language teaching or mother tongue teaching. The technical problems of the non-native learner's lack of knowledge of the rules of the target language has obscured the fact that the objectives for learning language are ultimately common to all work with language, native and non-native alike—the ability to interact with other speakers in such a way that the business of living can be accomplished, and the ability to express one's experience of the world in such a way that it can be made meaningful to others.

It is for this reason that there is no teacher of English to native speakers of English who would not find value in these chapters. In one particular respect, moreover, they have something special to gain. Developing a linguistic perspective is a matter of developing the power to stand outside one's own language to see how it is used. Where a teacher's own language has international status, and is widely used by peoples for whom it is not a native language, his linguistic perspective can be enormously increased by seeing how this language looks to those who have to meet it from outside.

In Chapter 4, what is said about the nature and degree of the *linguistic* difficulty of much of the literature currently chosen for

the foreign language context could apply with equal force to the native language context. The idea of assessing the 'degree of active mastery' of the language *and the culture* a literary text demands of its readers before submitting pupils to its study is as valuable to teachers of English in this country as in any other. In Chapter 5, the discussion of the 'language for learning' required for scientific and technical subjects, and how it might be acquired, has much to offer anyone who teaches these subjects. In this country, especially, it could alert any subject teacher to the nature of the linguistic problems their pupils face whenever they come into their class-rooms.

Peter Doughty



# 1 Why English?

'There never was a greater superstition than that a particular language can be incapable of expansion or of expressing abstruse or scientific ideas.' (Mahatma Gandhi)

That English is the language of international communication par excellence (for example it greatly outdistances its nearest competitor as the language in which most scientific papers are written) cannot be denied. Nor, as a reflection of this fact, can it be denied that in countries where English is not the mother tongue it is the world's most commonly taught foreign language. One other language, Chinese, has more native speakers, but they are largely restricted to a particular geographical area, and Chinese exhibits less standardisation in its spoken forms than does English. That English occupies a dominant position, however, does not necessarily mean that it will always be so.

The reasons for the spread of English are well known, from its position in Shakespeare's day when it was the mother tongue of a few million people living on an island off the north-west coast of Europe, to its present position where many peoples other than the native English can claim it as their own. The industrial revolution happened first in England; in their search for raw materials and markets and partly because of Victorian notions of national destiny, vast territories in all parts of the world were 'acquired' by the British. The language followed economic and political dominance. Even as British influence declined, that of the United States, to which the language had been carried in its colonial period by those emigrating from Britain, increased. The British Empire is dead and, to say the least of it, many countries are revising their notions about the propriety of American hegemony, but the language remains. In countries where the original inhabitants were mostly killed or were reduced in numbers by disease or the total disruption of their patterns of life and cultural self-sufficiency, like the United States itself or Australia, English became the language of all immigrants who occupied aboriginal

lands; in countries such as India or Nigeria where the native cultures for one reason or another were better able to resist Western technological shock and eventually secure independence, English was and may still remain the language of government and administration, the law courts and particularly High Courts, education and particularly higher education, commerce and banking and other prestigious and in the context of the modern state essential activities. In countries where other colonial powers ruled, like Spain and Portugal in Latin America, English is the principal foreign language.

The main difference between now and the days of Empire is that most countries can work out their own language policies rather than have policies imposed on them. In this context, one must say that English has no intrinsic superiority over any other language. It is one of the tenets of linguistics that one can do anything with any language given enough time. Gandhi's remark at the head of this chapter is accurate; all languages are capable of equivalent development. Had the industrial revolution happened first in India and the colonising process taken place in the reverse direction I might now be writing a book about Hindi as a foreign language. Language is value-free in relation to potential performance; a language spoken by only a few hundred people in let us say a remote valley in the highlands of New Guinea *could* be put to all manner of uses. It is I think necessary to say this because it is not uncommon to hear people, teachers included, making naïve and false judgements about 'civilised' and 'primitive' languages, when what they really mean are languages spoken by people who happen to live in technological or non-technological cultures. Only a few thousand years ago, a relatively short period in terms of human history on the planet, the lineal ancestor of English was also only spoken by a few hundred skin-clad people who were at the time probably wandering in a desultory fashion in a vaguely westerly direction along the edges of some Central European swamp.

Of course, problems of intrinsic merit are not the only ones that need to be considered. Although nothing of significance has happened to the English people genetically, a lot has happened to the English language, in relation to the ways it is used and what it is used for, that has not happened to all other languages. Again, the question of whether or not the English language should be used should not be confused with the past merits or beastliness of the British. It is not very rational to reject English chauvinistically

*just because* it is the language of a former colonial power, if it has a certain place and certain resources invested in it in the country concerned. There may, I admit, be other more valid reasons for rejecting it.

Where English is concerned I suggest that some of the determinants of a linguistic policy should be these. If it is already spoken in a particular country, who speaks it and for what purposes? Is the country monoglot, with one mother tongue, or polyglot? If the latter, is English used as a lingua franca in communication between different language groups? If it is thought fit to replace it for this purpose, is it best replaced by another lingua franca or by one of the native languages? If the latter, what will be the reactions of people from other language groups? The reactions of those who feel themselves linguistically disadvantaged can be very forceful indeed, in Europe as much as anywhere else. Many Welsh speakers feel strongly about the inferior position, as they see it, of Welsh compared with English in Wales. French and Flemish speakers in Belgium have been known to riot for or against one or the other language.

If English is to be replaced or partly supplanted, what effects will this have on the educational system? Are there textbooks in other languages? Is it economic to translate everything for each language group? If a country's needs for English have been adequately assessed, needs such as those of science and technology, airline pilots, diplomacy, tourism to and from the main centres of the English-speaking world, how far down the education system does one start and with how many and what kind of people? What is an acceptable wastage rate? That is to say, how many people begin to learn the language who never become users of it, in any meaningful sense?

The question of teacher supply and training has to be considered, for English and all other subjects, as has the question of teacher quality. If, at secondary level, a high proportion of teachers have no real command of the language, is it better to abandon teaching the language at that level or perhaps to continue it for reasons of nominal equality? Will English be taught in all schools or only in some? If in only some, what criteria of selection will be used; fee-paying, nearness to the capital or to libraries, intelligence of pupils, however defined, or what? Will English be the medium of instruction, and if so at what level will it begin to be so? If it is the medium of instruction will its introduction be gradual, subject by subject, or total at a certain defined level?



Some, though not all, of these topics will be touched upon in this book, for it is not my intention to write a treatise on educational planning in respect of English. The list is not exhaustive—I have not mentioned the kinds of skill which the English syllabus is supposed to teach—but one would expect policy-makers to be asking the kind of question above and framing solutions related to the needs of their particular countries as they see them. Certainly no independent country should rely on expatriates to provide its answers for it. Their role is only to give advice if asked, and otherwise to fulfil in a professional fashion the terms of whatever contract has brought them there. They have no enduring stake in English in another country, however it has manifested itself. Probably the worst thing that any country can do is blindly to adopt in full a foreign syllabus. These are usually metropolitan in character, but have normally developed over a long period of time to suit particular sets of social conditions; transplanted to foreign soil they quickly become cancerous growths, using up the resources of the body politic and returning nothing.

In discussing language policies I take one thing as axiomatic, that, all things being equal, it is desirable to educate a child in its mother tongue for as long as is possible. The importance of a child's early language experience as a critical factor in determining the quality of its eventual educational performance is now accepted by many authorities, particularly in relation to cognitive development. If the mother tongue is not to be the medium of instruction then the mother tongue is inevitably devalued and the child will not be slow to draw the inference that the language in which it expressed its first feelings and emotions is regarded as inferior. Because of this and because it is common sense to suppose that it is more difficult to maintain quality of educational provision if the education is carried out in a language which may be foreign to both teacher and taught, then a change in medium of instruction should not be lightly or too rapidly made. In countries which are monolingual or nearly so one would expect with the development of educational resources that English would be taught largely as a foreign language. In those many countries which are not monolingual, it is much more difficult to advocate any policy with the certainty that it is the right or even the best possible policy. For example, the abandonment of English as a medium of instruction in the universities of a particular country and the substitution of regional languages could lead to the Balkanisation of higher education in that country. Neither teachers nor students could