

Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages

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Translated by R.R. van Oirsouw



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Foreword

The present book is a completely revised and updated version of a handbook originally written in Dutch by four members of the same team of authors (T. van Els *et al.*, *Handboek voor de Toegepaste Taalkunde. Het leren en onderwijzen van moderne vreemde talen*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff, 1977). The contents and plan of the book have been greatly inspired by the courses on the learning and teaching of second/foreign languages that we have been teaching to university students over a number of years. An important section of the student population that attend our courses prepare for the foreign language teaching profession. The courses are intended to provide prospective teachers and researchers in this area of applied linguistics with essential theoretical background information.

Although all chapters of the book have been written by individual members of our team, we like to think of the book as a joint undertaking for which we accept joint responsibility. Continuous mutual consultations, over the years, about the various teaching programmes and many critical discussions of earlier versions of the texts have led to a high degree of consensus on the contents and form of the book. The editorial finishing touch was applied by, mainly, Theo Bongaerts and by Theo van Els.

It is impossible to name all those who in the long history of this book have contributed to its completion. We owe a great debt of gratitude to many, not in the least to those who have reviewed the previous Dutch edition. We wish to thank Pieter Seuren, who urged us to prepare the English version, Rob van Oirsouw, who, as the translator of this book, was charged with the almost impossible task of merging five different styles into one, and Bert Weltens, who compiled the *Index of Persons* and the *Index of Subjects*. Thanks are also due to the publishing house of Wolters-Noordhoff (Groningen) for their co-operation. And finally we would like to thank all colleagues at the Department of Applied Linguistics in Nijmegen who in one way or another helped administratively to complete the manuscript.

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Part I

The Field of Study: A First Outline

1

Introduction

The juxtaposition in the title of this book of 'applied linguistics' and 'the learning and teaching of foreign languages' is intended to suggest that, although the two terms are not synonymous, the area of applied linguistics that concerns us here, i.e. that of the learning and teaching of foreign languages, constitutes, in our opinion, the most important area within the extensive field of applied linguistics.

In the title of the Dutch edition, the book is called a 'handbook'. There are two reasons for this. First of all, we wanted to indicate that in this publication we aim to cover all the subparts of this area which we consider to be most relevant. Secondly, we wished to emphasize that we also intend this book to be a reference book and an introduction to other publications in the field. With this last consideration in mind we have included many bibliographical references.

Foreign language teaching (FLT) is a matter of considerable social importance. There is a great demand for it, and in many countries FLT forms an important part of the educational facilities provided. Such provisions include not only all forms of regular education, from primary schools to universities, but also company courses, evening classes and summer schools, to mention a few other types of (usually adult) education. The frame of reference for our discussion of the learning and teaching of foreign languages is that particular part of regular school education in which children from 10 to 16 come into contact with FLT for the first time; in other words, we shall mainly be talking about secondary education and, in some cases, about the higher grades in primary education. But our frame of reference ought to be narrowed down even further. The FLT that we have in mind is the type where the teaching takes place in a different linguistic environment from that of the language to be learned: we will be

2 Introduction

focusing on L2 learning in an L1 environment, on *foreign* language learning, therefore, rather than *second* language learning. Our preference for this particular frame of reference is of course closely related to the fact that this book originated in the Netherlands, where most teaching of languages other than the mother tongue concerns the teaching of foreign languages in schools. FLT in schools is very important in the Netherlands and rests on a long and fertile tradition. We believe that what is said in this book about this particular area of FLT will apply to a considerable extent, *mutatis mutandis*, both to many other areas of FLT and to second language teaching.

We will, therefore, not devote separate attention to the teaching of second languages. In chapters of the second part of this book second language *learning* figures several times, but what separate attention is devoted to it must be seen in the light of our treatment of foreign language learning and FLT.

The times when it was fairly generally believed that teaching, including FLT, could hardly be subjected to scientific investigation, have passed. To make a sweeping generalization, one might say that in the past the research interest in FLT was focused exclusively on the language itself, and that it is only in the last few decades that the educational and psychological aspects of FLT have begun to attract their share of research attention. In many countries this development can undoubtedly be accounted for by changes in FLT needs and objectives. In the Netherlands, for instance, the incorporation of three foreign languages in the curricula of many types of secondary schools is no longer taken for granted, and other languages besides English, German and French are being introduced. Related to these changes in needs is the discussion that has been started about the traditional objectives of the teaching of each individual language. These changes in needs and objectives have prompted research into the most efficient teaching methods in different educational settings. It was realized that this necessitates fundamental research into foreign language learning processes. The L1 and L2 learning research that had developed independently of FLT provided a useful frame of reference.

We have written this book for those who have an interest in theories about the learning and teaching of foreign languages. We intend the book specifically for the following three categories of readers: (future) teachers of foreign languages, (future) researchers in this area of applied linguistics, and those who train (future) teachers and researchers. Independently of the question of how much each of these three categories should know about the subject, there is by no means full agreement on which knowledge is relevant. It is generally accepted that theories in this area are based on linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and educational theory. The actual content of teaching programmes in this area of applied linguistics varies from place to place, and different handbooks tend to emphasize different aspects. Not all handbooks assume the same amount of knowledge about the disciplines mentioned above. We expect our readers to have some personal experience in learning a foreign language. We also expect them to be familiar with the basic concepts of theoretical and descriptive linguistics, but we do not assume familiarity with psychological research.

This book contains the information that we consider essential for those who

train future teachers of foreign languages, and for (prospective) researchers in this area of applied linguistics. Teachers will find that the book contains more information than is strictly necessary for their day-to-day teaching; for them, it is intended to be a work of reference and guide to further study to improve their day-to-day teaching. The preceding sentence might be taken to suggest that we have practical advice to offer to teachers. We do not provide any made-to-measure, directly applicable suggestions with regard to teaching. What we wish to offer is the theoretical background which is essential for diagnosing problems and without which effective therapy can only be achieved accidentally. Without a theoretical foundation a foreign language teacher can only gratefully, but helplessly, accept the suggestions for solving his practical problems offered by others.

We have already indicated that this book deals with only one area of the discipline of applied linguistics, be it the most important one. Moreover, within the area we have selected, we will not discuss all aspects, and not every aspect will be discussed equally exhaustively. We will pay more attention to oral than to written skills, for instance, to cater for the changing insights into the goals of (initial) FLT. Some aspects of the area selected will not be dealt with separately, although other writers in the field may have done so. The most conspicuous absentees are probably translation, the teaching of literature and the teaching of culture.

Only a subpart of all the aspects of translation are relevant within our framework. Translation can certainly play a useful role in training and testing language skills, but these are only two of the many aspects that would have to be dealt with in a separate discussion of translation. Translation as a discipline in its own right, the various ideas about what translation is from a philological, linguistic or sociolinguistic point of view, and the problems involved in training professional translators are matters which are too remote from what will concern us here.

Neither will we be concerned with the pedagogical questions raised by the teaching of literature. Traditionally, the teaching of literature has two main objectives, namely developing the appreciation of literature and engendering knowledge of literary theories, schools and works. The question of what the objectives of the teaching of literature could be is only very indirectly connected with the objectives of teaching language skills. In other respects, too, especially where the teaching of the two components mentioned above is concerned, there is no link to the framework of our discussion. The didactic procedures for developing appreciation and knowledge of literature are not only very different with respect to each other, they are also entirely different from the type of didactic procedures required for foreign language learning. Neither are these strategies specific: both apply, in comparable fashion, to the teaching of L1 literature, and they each exhibit a number of similarities to the teaching of other subjects, such as art and history.

Insofar as culture is a part of FLT proper, it will receive some mention in the chapters on objectives (9) and content selection (10); we do not, however, discuss it as an autonomous subpart with its own objectives and didactic procedures. In those cases where culture is taught in schools as an autonomous and

4 Introduction

independent subject, the didactic procedures used differ, as in the teaching of literature, from those used in teaching foreign language skills, but are at the same time not specific for the teaching of culture only.

We were in considerable doubt as to whether or not to treat research questions in our field of study in a separate chapter. Eventually we have decided not to. First of all, even if we had inserted a separate chapter on research, we would still have had to scatter the information on actual research projects and their findings over the rest of the book, to discuss them in conjunction with the relevant aspects of our field of study. Secondly, in a general introduction to applied linguistics such as we aim to offer in this book, a systematic treatment – be it elementary – of all basic questions of empirical research does not seem to be called for. For such matters as choice of research design, selection and matching of groups of subjects, controlling of variables and statistical analysis of research data the reader had better consult introductory handbooks of empirical research in the social sciences. What aspects of applied linguistic research are touched upon, we have spread over the other chapters. In chapter 2 the question is discussed whether research in the field of applied linguistics is necessarily applied in its orientation or can also be fundamentally orientated, and in chapter 7 the ‘autonomy’ of this field of research is gone into. A number of specific aspects of second and foreign language learning research are dealt with in chapter 5 (5.1.1.), in particular features of research design pertaining to period of data collection (longitudinal versus cross-sectional design), informants (single or multiple case-studies versus experiments with larger groups of subjects), and data collection procedures (naturalistic observation versus experimental tasks). In chapter 3 (3.2.1.) we compare our field with respect to the nature of data and procedures of data collection with the field of linguistic research. And although our treatment of language proficiency testing is in the first place geared to the use of such tests in FLT, much of it is equally applicable to the use of proficiency tests in applied linguistic research, especially such matters as reliability and validity of tests and discrete point versus integrative skill testing.

Our discussion of our field of study is contained in 15 chapters which are grouped into three parts. Part I contains, besides this Introduction, a chapter which aims to clarify the contents, methods and practical relevance of applied linguistics for the field of FLT, on the basis of a discussion of a number of questions of a terminological kind.

In Part II, chapters 3 to 6, we deal with what insights linguistic research, but especially psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic research, has provided on language behaviour, first language learning, second and foreign language learning, and learner characteristics.

Part III opens with a pivotal chapter on what relevance the various source disciplines may have for our field of applied linguistics. It is followed by a chapter surveying the historical development of FLT, which should provide the information that enables the reader to see the subsequent chapters in the right perspective. The rest of the chapters of Part III deal with the various aspects that can be distinguished in the didactic cycle. These are: the defining of aims and

objectives; the selection of course content; the gradation of course content; didactic procedures; the use of media; textbook selection; and testing. Particularly in these chapters the restriction of our field of study to FLT in the stricter sense will be apparent.

2

Applied linguistics

2.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this book we have indicated that the subject matter which we shall discuss in this book, viz. the learning and teaching of foreign languages, is by many referred to as 'applied linguistics', although as a matter of fact it is only one of many sub-areas of applied linguistics. Some elucidation of why this is so seems appropriate at this point; this primarily terminological elucidation will also serve to illustrate some typical aspects of scientific endeavour within the field. We aim to achieve this by first of all dealing with a few aspects directly concerned with the two component parts of the term 'applied linguistics', then by dealing with the historical background of the term, and lastly, by comparing our interpretation of this area of research with that of others.

2.2 Analysis of the term

Many researchers have written at length on what the term 'applied linguistics' means. This fact alone could be taken to demonstrate that a purely semantic definition of the field will fail; if the field indeed were what the combination of the words 'applied' and 'linguistics' means, then the terminological problem would have been solved a long time ago. For although one can in principle distinguish at least some different types of applied science (see Back 1970:20 ff.), and although researchers are not agreed on what linguistics actually is, this issue would not have been the subject of so many books and articles in the past 25 years, if a purely semantic solution would have been sufficient to settle it. The problem, however, has always been that the semantic path is not the only path to the definition of the term 'applied linguistics' (see Corder 1972:10).

2.2.1 'Applied'

In all applied sciences the aim is to achieve or help to achieve goals which are outside the actual realm of the sciences themselves. Applied linguistics is, therefore, not the same as linguistics; neither is it a subsection of linguistics. Applications of sciences can be divided into a number of types. Back (1970:20 ff.) distinguishes three types of applied science, for which he gives examples from the field of linguistics:

- (1) The methods and results from one branch of science are used to develop insights into another branch of science; among the examples from linguistics-