



## Educational Linguistics: A Personal Note

Bernard Spolsky\*

### Article Info

*DOI:*

*Article History:*

Received: 28 Oct. 2020

Accepted: 24 Nov. 2020

Published: 1 Feb. 2021

*Keywords:*

Applied linguistics,  
Home-school language gap,  
Language management,  
Translanguaging

*Article Type:*

ORIGINAL

### Abstract

First proposed in 1972, the field of Educational Linguistics deals with the intersection of linguistics and language sciences with formal and informal education. In the past half-century, it has been recognized as a method of planning and implementing language education and working to overcome the gap between home and school languages that affects 40% of the children in the world. New developments involve recognizing the existence of complex linguistic repertoires in an increasingly digital world.

## Introduction

The foundation of a new journal in the field of educational linguistics gives me an opportunity to review a topic that I have been working on for many years. My first attempt to define and illustrate educational linguistics was in a paper that I read at the Third Applied Linguistics Congress in Copenhagen (Spolsky, 1972), followed some years later by a small book introducing the field (Spolsky, 1978). In the introduction to the book, I explained that I had proposed a new term because of discomfort with the term “applied linguistics.” When applied linguistics simply meant language teaching, as it did in Europe at the time, it was superfluous and missed all the other potential applications such as translation, lexicography, language policy, and information retrieval. But a second difficulty introduced by the term was the implication that linguistics must be applied to something. Often, theoretical linguists (like children with a hammer looking for something to hit) assumed that their results could be applied to language teaching, so that structural linguistics led to the deadening effect of pattern practice. The next generation of Young Turks led by Noam Chomsky took the opposite view: Chomsky (1970) argued that the pure field of linguistic theory had no relevance to language pedagogy. There were numerous effects of this, but the main one was to build a wall between his many followers in the higher status area of theoretical linguists and those relegated to the field of applied linguistics concerned with language teaching.

A few applied linguists tried to make up for this by applying linguistic theory directly: I recall a set of so-called transformational drills, but theory kept getting more abstract. Another important and influential group developed the field of second language acquisition, asking how to acquire (or “learn”) another language if the innate device that Chomskians believed in was not longer available after puberty (E. V. Clark, 1973; Krashen, 1981). There was a brief burst of interest in error analysis and contrastive analysis, assuming that learners’ grammatical mistakes could be identified and cured (Spolsky, 1979). Second language acquisition continued to study the way children and adults learned additional languages, concentrating on the effects of various teaching methods.

What I was looking for was a term for a wider field that encompassed whatever was relevant to language and education: the many sub-disciplines of linguistics (and especially sociolinguistics) that provided the background for language education policy and practice and the fields of education that contributed to the teaching of language skills. Educational linguistics (a term modeled on educational psychology and educational sociology) seemed appropriate, suggesting a sub-field of linguistics in which future practitioners could receive their training along with a basis in educational theory and practice.

### What is Educational Linguistics?

The scope of educational linguistics as I described it in Spolsky (1978) is the intersection of linguistics and the language sciences with formal and informal education. The central field of linguistic theory is the study and description of language, an area divided into phonology, grammar, and semantics. Advances in these areas have important implications but not applications for educational linguistics, both in their influence on notions of language acquisition and learning, and in their use in language teaching (Spolsky, 1970a). For instance, phonological theory permitted showing the lack of congruence between sound systems and writing, a fact basic to the understanding of the reading process. But it is the sub-fields that (Voegelin, no date) labelled “hyphenated linguistics”, psycholinguistics (which include language acquisition and processing) and sociolinguistics (which deals with language use and policy) that offer the main help. Second language acquisition developed as a sub-field of psycholinguistics (Wen, 2013), and language education policy grew as a part of language policy (Spolsky, 1977, 2008). The two areas are closely related: educational linguistics includes language policy, and may be considered one of the methods of language management.

## Developments

An important advance was the founding in 1976 of the program in educational linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, in the Graduate School of Education under the deanship of the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes and led by Nancy Hornberger. This program soon began to produce a number of graduates whose research and publications helped build educational linguistics (Hornberger, 2001). The term was also used by Stubbs, (1984), in a book titled “Applied Sociolinguistics” and in Edwards (1987).

An important recognition was the opening paper by Michael Halliday (Halliday, 1987) at a conference on language and education held in Hong Kong in 1987 in which he defined educational linguistics: “educational linguistics, while in some aspects much less than a theory of language (since it can ignore many features of language as irrelevant to its concerns), in another respect, it is more than a theory of language: it is a theory of learning” (p. 15). Development, Halliday noted, is a fourth dimension, added to dialectal, functional, and historical. Thus the term and the field started to be used more widely.

One significant development was in the related sub-field of language testing and assessment. There, the important breakthrough was a new emphasis on the social relevance of the use of test results. The psychometrists who dominated the field tried to overcome the notion of the “inevitable uncertainty of examinations” (Edgeworth, 1888; 1890) by working on the statistical qualities of tests in order to establish reliability and validity. Their approach was challenged by the inclusion of use of results as part of validity, a step authorized by a leading psychometrist (Messick, 1980; 1989) and applied to language testing by (Bachman, 1990; 2005). Acknowledging the way that tests could be used to manage language policy, as proposed by Shohamy (2001), brought the social and political relevance of language testing and teaching into focus, with important implications for testing in general and language teaching as well.

By the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the critical areas in education was university admission, a procedure dominated by the development of major industrialized tests like SAT. SAT was a standardized test developed by the College Board in 1925 and administered by the Educational Testing Service. Its success encouraged a competitor, the ACT operated by an independent organization starting in 1959. While these major tests did not deal with language testing, they influenced the approach of the Test of English as a Foreign Language, first administered in 1963 by an independent group and taken over by Educational Testing Service (Spolsky, 1995).

Standardized and “objective” industrialized testing came to dominate the market (J. L. D. Clark & Davidson, 1993) but there was a counter-trend. In 1985, a new organization *FairTest*, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing was launched, and its campaign against standardized testing has succeeded; more than 70% of four-year colleges in the US now offer admission without tests. In the language testing field, too, concern about test use and ethics (Lynch, 1997; Shohamy, 1997; Spolsky, 1981, 1984) led the development of ethical codes (Jia, 2009). This concern about the use of tests was associated with a growing interest in the social relevance of language testing and teaching.

In Europe, where standardized testing was slowly becoming more established, there was a movement to investigate further the nature of language proficiency, driven also by a perceived need to find a common method of assessing the results of language teaching. This led to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a framework that set out to combine methods and models of linguistic competence (Council of Europe, 2001; North, 1995). An important effect was to add sociolinguistic relevance to the field of language testing and teaching that had been largely psycholinguistic and pedagogical. Thus, educational linguistics had developed a stronger basis through the inclusion of social relevance and the weight being given to both sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

## **Expanding field**

One can trace the expansion of the field by looking at the contents of a few key publications. Spolsky (1978) had a dozen topical chapters, the second being “The language barrier to education,” a revised and expanded version of three earlier papers (Spolsky, 1971, 1974a) that reflected my concern at what I was discovering about the gap many pupils faced between their home language and the language of instruction. This was later confirmed by a critically important study (Walter, 2003) where we learned that about 40% of pupils (not just in third world countries but also in a developed nation like Belgium) were being taught in a language they did not understand. I discovered that 86% of the Navajo children coming to Navajo schools had not heard English before they came to school (Spolsky, 1970b, 1974b). This disturbing fact influenced my ordering of the chapters in Spolsky (1999), with three of the first four devoted to sociolinguistic issues. Spolsky and Hult (2008) is a little more cautious, placing sociolinguistics sixth in the chapters labeled Foundations, but the next part (Core issues) opens with the language of instruction (Walter, 2008), and includes many sociolinguistic topics.

In order to provide a picture of the development of educational linguistics, the Table in Appendix shows the contents of four books: (Spolsky, 1978), (Spolsky, 1999), (Spolsky & Hult, 2008) and (Hult & Spolsky, 2021). Of course they vary: Spolsky (1978) was a monograph with all chapters written by the author; Spolsky (1999) was a “concise” encyclopedia with items written by a large number of contributors and including over fifty biographical notes of scholars working in the field; Spolsky and Hult (2008) is a Handbook with items written by invited contributors; and Hult and Spolsky (2021) will be a second edition of the Handbook, with revised contributions and some additions. But the comparison between Spolsky (1999) with a dozen chapters and Spolsky and Hult (2008 and 2021) with 44 pieces shows the growth in coverage in thirty years.

Spolsky (1978) already showed the trend in the field towards sociolinguistics, which has been having a major influence on the field. The emphasis on the environment beyond the classroom, the questioning of the native speaker concept, and the widening of definition beyond named languages to linguistic repertoires have changed the field fundamentally. Starting with Kachru’s recognition of the varieties of English (Kachru, 1983a, 1983b), allowing for goals of teaching other than a single approved standard, and developing into the acknowledgement of the diverse multilingual repertoires included in the concept of translanguaging, educational linguistics have allowed development of approaches that take into account the real language proficiency of learners. Questioning of the goal of native language expertise (Davies, 1991, 2003; Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2016; Spolsky, 2002) and the even more basic question of the definition of language raised by studies of urban repertoires (Arnaut, Blommaert, et al., 2015; Blommaert, 2013) has led to the concept of translanguaging, offered as a basis for educational linguistic theory and practice (Garcia, 2009; García & Wei, 2013; Li, 2018). If we cannot define a language clearly and simply (what is English?), once we recognize the diversity in community and individual repertoires, how do we help learner expand their repertoire without abandoning what they already know? This remains a basic challenge for educational linguistics.

A second major development and challenge has been through advances in computers and information retrieval. Early computerized teaching and testing approaches were based on the hope that linguistic theory would provide the best explanation of language competence, but the failure of attempts at building translation and teaching models based on parsing suggested the need to exploit the enormous and growing language corpora that more powerful computers could manage. Providing better translation than the linguistic approaches, corpus-based programs also provided workable spelling and grammar checkers and opened the way to computerized language teaching. The pandemic which closed schools and classes required remote language courses, whether individual Skype or group Zoom arrangements. It remains to be seen if these developments will continue to be used after schools reopen. Related computer-based technique for emails and social media encourages individuals to engage in communication in languages they are not fully proficient in, and provides a kind of language learning practice. Essentially, then, educational linguistics will need to fully adapt to the growing digital world. Educational linguistics, passing its half century, needs to integrate understanding of the diversity of linguistic repertoires with the new potential of a computer-dominated world. It must first overcome the ignorance that allows so many children to be handicapped by inadequate language education policies and the hegemonic monolingualism nurtured by nationalism.

**Table 1.**

*Table of Contents for Spolsky (1978), Spolsky (1999), Spolsky and Hult (2008) and Hult and Spolsky (2021).*

<b>(Spolsky, 1978)</b>	<b>(Spolsky, 1999)</b>	<b>(Spolsky &amp; Hult, 2008)</b>	<b>(Hult &amp; Spolsky, 2021)</b>
<b>Educational Linguistics</b>	Educational linguistics	Educational Linguistics + History	Educational Linguistics + History
<b>Language barrier</b>	Home-school gap (8 chapters)		
<b>Multilingualism</b>	Multilingualism	Bilingualism in home and school	Bilingualism in home and school
<b>Language policies</b>			
<b>Sociolinguistic factors</b>	Sociolinguistics	Sociolinguistics + Anthropological linguistics	Sociolinguistics + Anthropological linguistics
<b>Schools</b>	School context (8 chapters)	Educational systems	
<b>Language</b>		Linguistic theory	
<b>Language acquisition</b>	Language learning	Language acquisition management + 5 chapters	
<b>Knowing a language</b>	SLA (10 chapters) Testing (12 chapters)	Assessment (5 chapters)	
<b>Individual and education</b>	The individual (9 chapters)		
<b>Other factors</b>	The Profession (50+ chapters)		
<b>Language education policy</b>	School language policies	Central frameworks	
	Applied linguistics		
	Ethics		
	Diglossia		
	Language loyalty		
	Linguicide		
	Minority languages	Vernaculars	
	Rights		
	Societal bilingualism		
	Socialization		
	Standardization	Language cultivation	
	Endangered languages	Ecological language policy + Endangered languages	Endangered languages
	National policies (19 chapters)		
	Literacy and oracy	Literacy education (5 chapters)	Literacy education (5 chapters)
	Challenged learners (6 chapters)	Deaf	Deaf
	Second language processing (5 chapters)		
	Electronic age (4 chapters)		
	National curricula (10 chapters)		
	Grammar in mother tongue teaching (6 chapters)		
	Reading in MT (15 chapters)		
	Spelling MT (5 chapters)		
	MT writing (3 chapters)		
	Additional language teaching (20 chapters)		
		Politics and ideologies	Politics and ideologies
		Language of instruction	
		Post-colonialization and globalization	Post-colonialization and globalization
		Impact of English	
		Research and practice (8 chapters)	Research and practice (8 chapters)
			Race and Language education
			Linguistic variation
			Structure and agency
			Translanguaging and repertoire
			Migrants and refugees
			Digital Technologies for Language Learning

**References**

- Arnaut, K., Blommaert, J., Rampton, B., & Spotti, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Language and Superdiversity*. Routledge.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bachman, L. F. (2005). Building and supporting a case for test use. *Language Assessment Quarterly: An International Journal*, 2(1), 1-34.
- Blommaert, J. (2013). *Ethnography, superdiversity and linguistic landscapes: Chronicles of complexity* (1). Bris: Multilingual Matters.
- Clark, E. V. (1973). What's in a word? On the child's acquisition in his first language. In T. E. Moore (Ed.), *Cognitive development and the acquisition of language*. Academic Press.
- Clark, J. L. D., & Davidson, F. (1993). Language-learning research: Cottage industry or consolidated enterprise. In A. O. Hadley (Ed.), *Research in language learning: Principles, process, and prospects* (pp. 254-278). National Textbook Co.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, A. (1991). *The native speaker in applied linguistics*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Davies, A. (2003). *The native speaker: Myth and reality*. Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Edgeworth, F. Y. (1888). The statistics of examinations. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 51, 599-635.
- Edgeworth, F. Y. (1890). The element of chance in competitive examinations. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 53, 644-663.
- Edwards, V. (1987). Educational Linguistics. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 6(2), 141-144.
- Garcia, O. (2009). Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21st century. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty, & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social justice through multilingual education* (pp. 140-158). Multilingual Matters.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2013). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Springer.
- Halliday, M. (1987). *Some basic concepts of educational linguistics*. Paper presented at the Languages in Education in a Bi-lingual or Multi-lingual Setting, Hong Kong: ILE, Hong Kong.

- Hornberger, N. H. (2001). Educational Linguistics as a Field: A View from Penn's Program on the Occasion of Its 25th Anniversary. *Working papers in educational linguistics*, 17, 1-26.
- Hult, F. M., & Spolsky, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Handbook of Educational Linguistics* (2nd ed., pp.??). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jia, Y. (2009). Ethical Standards for Language Testing Professionals: An Introduction to Five Major Codes. *Shiken: JALT Testing & Evaluation SIG Newsletter*, 13(2), 2-8.
- Kachru, B. B. (1983a). *The Indianization of English: The English language in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Kachru, B. B. (Ed.) (1983b). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Pergamon.
- Li, W. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 31(1), 9-30.
- Lynch, B. K. (1997). In search of the ethical test. *Language Testing*, 14(3), 315-327.
- Messick, S. (1980). Test validity and the ethics of assessment. *American Psychologist*, 35, 1012-1027.
- Messick, S. (1989). Validity. In R. L. Linn (Ed.), *Educational Measurement* (3rd ed., pp. 13-103). New York: Macmillan.
- Nic Fhlannchadha, S., & Hickey, T. M. (2016). Minority language ownership and authority: perspectives of native speakers and new speakers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-16.
- North, B. (1995). The development of a common framework of descriptors of language proficiency based on a theory of measurement. *System*, 23(4), 445-465.
- Shohamy, E. (1997). Testing methods, testing consequences: are they ethical? Are they fair? *Language Testing*, 14(3), 340-349.
- Shohamy, E. (2001). *The Power of tests: a critical perspective of the uses of language tests*. London: Longman.
- Spolsky, B. (1970a). Linguistics and language pedagogy - applications or implications? In J. E. Alatis (Ed.), *Twentieth Annual Round Table on Languages and Linguistics* (pp. 143-155). Georgetown University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (1970b). Navajo language maintenance: six-year-olds in 1969. *Language Sciences*(13), 19-24.
- Spolsky, B. (1971). The language barrier to education. In G. E. Perren (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary approaches to language* (pp. 8-17). CILT.

- Spolsky, B. (1972). *Educational Linguistics*. Paper presented at the Third Applied Linguistics Conference, Copenhagen.
- Spolsky, B. (1974a). Linguistics and the language barrier to education. In T. A. Sebeok, A. S. Abramson, D. Hymes, H. Rubenstein, E. Stankiewicz, & B. Spolsky (Eds.), *Current Trends in Linguistics: Linguistics and adjacent arts and sciences* (Vol. 12, pp. 2027-2038). Mouton.
- Spolsky, B. (1974b). Navajo language maintenance: six-year-olds in 1969. In F. Pialiorsi (Ed.), *Teaching the bilingual* (pp. 138-149). The University of Arizona Press.
- Spolsky, B. (1977). The establishment of language education policy in multilingual societies. In B. Spolsky & R. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Frontiers of bilingual education* (pp. 1-21). Rowley, MA.: Newbury House Publishers.
- Spolsky, B. (1978). *Educational linguistics: an introduction*. Rowley, MA.: Newbury House Publishers.
- Spolsky, B. (1979). Contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage and other useful fads. *Modern Language Journal* 62, 250-257.
- Spolsky, B. (1981). Some ethical questions about language testing. In C. Klein-Braley & D. K. Stevenson (Eds.), *Practice and problems in language testing* (pp. 5-30). Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter D. Lang.
- Spolsky, B. (1984). The uses of language tests: an ethical envoi. In C. Rivera (Ed.), *Placement procedures in bilingual education: education and policy issues* (pp. 3-7). Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Spolsky, B. (1986). Overcoming language barriers to education in a multilingual world. In B. Spolsky (Ed.), *Language and education in multilingual settings* (pp. 184-193). Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Spolsky, B. (1995). *Measured words: the development of objective language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (2002). Norms, native speakers and reversing language shift. In S. Gass, K. Bardovi-Harlig, S. S. Magnan, & J. Walz (Eds.), *Pedagogical norms for second and foreign language and teaching. Studies in honour of Albert Valdman* (pp. 41-58). John Benjamins.
- Spolsky, B. (2008). Investigating language education policy. In K. A. King & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed., Vol. 10: Research methods in language and education, pp. 27-40). New York: Springer Science.

- Spolsky, B. (Ed.) (1999). *Concise Encyclopedia of Educational Linguistics*. Elsevier.
- Spolsky, B., & Hult, F. M. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of Educational Linguistics*. Blackwell.
- Stubbs, M. (1984). Applied discourse analysis and educational linguistics. In P. Trudgill (Ed.), *Applied Sociolinguistics* (pp. 203-244). Academic Press.
- Voegelin, C. F. (no date). *On the Probability of Autonomous Linguistics Converging with Hyphenated Linguistics*. American Philosophical Society Ms. Coll. 68, (Subseries B.). Philadelphia PA.
- Walter, S. L. (2003). Does language of instruction matter in education? In M. R. Wise, T. N. Headland, & R. M. Brend (Eds.), *Language and life: essays in memory of Kenneth L. Pike* (pp. 611-635). SIL International and the University of Texas at Arlington.
- Walter, S. L. (2008). The language of instruction issue: Framing an empirical perspective. In B. Spolsky & F. M. Hult (Eds.), *Handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 129-146). Blackwell Publishing.
- Wen, H. (2013). Chomsky's language development theories: Rescuing parents out of dilemma. *International Journal of Learning & Development*, 3(3), 148-153.

**Bernard Spolsky** was born in New Zealand in 1932 and educated at the University of New Zealand (BA and MA in English); he later earned a PhD in linguistics at the Université de Montréal. He taught at universities in Israel, Canada and the United States and retired from Bar-Ilan University as Professor emeritus in 2000. He founded and edited two journals: *Applied Linguistics* and *Language Policy*. His books include *The Languages of Jerusalem*, *Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, *The Languages of Israel*, *Language Policy*, *Language Management*, *Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy* and *The Languages of the Jews*, and he has published over 200 articles and chapters. He received an Honorary Doctorate in Literature in 2009 from Victoria University of Wellington. He is a Fellow of the Linguistic Societies of America and India.