

The Handbook of Language Teaching

Edited by

*Michael H. Long and
Catherine J. Doughty*

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Part I Overview

1 Language Teaching

MICHAEL H. LONG

Hundreds of millions of people voluntarily attempt to learn languages each year. They include adults who seek proficiency in a new language for academic, professional, occupational, vocational training, or religious purposes, or because they have become related through marriage to speakers of languages other than their mother tongue. Then, there are (some would argue, “captive”) school-age children who experience their education through the medium of a second language, or for whom one or more foreign languages are obligatory subjects in their regular curriculum. In addition to these easily recognizable groups, language teachers around the world are increasingly faced with non-volunteers. These are the tens of millions of people each year forced to learn new languages and dialects, and sometimes new identities, because they have fled traumatic experiences of one kind or another – war, drought, famine, disease, intolerable economic circumstances, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of social conflict – crossing linguistic borders in the process. Since the horror and frequency of such events show no signs of decreasing, language teaching is likely to remain a critical matter for these groups for the foreseeable future, with the scale of forced mass migrations if anything likely to grow in the twenty-first century, due to the potentially disastrous effects of climate change.

For both groups of learners, volunteers and non-volunteers, language teaching is increasingly recognized as important by international organizations, governments, militaries, intelligence agencies, corporations, NGOs, education systems, health systems, immigration and refugee services, migrant workers, bilingual families, and the students themselves. With the growing recognition come greater responsibility and a need for accountability. LT¹ is rarely a matter of life or death, but it often has a significant impact on the educational life chances, economic potential and social wellbeing of individual students and whole societies. Students and entities that sponsor them increasingly want to know not just that the way they are taught works, but that it constitutes optimal use of their time and money.

Demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency is often difficult. Historically, LT has been regarded as an art – or a craft, at least – not a science, with scant regard

and little financial support for research. Demand for some languages, notably English and Chinese, has been so great in recent years that, with demand far exceeding supply, few consumers have been in a position to quibble over the quality of their instruction. In the case of some rarely taught languages for which there is a sudden surge in need, e.g., as a by-product of military actions or natural disasters, students and sponsors have no choice but to accept whatever can be found, adequate or not. Even in the case of widely taught languages, like English, Chinese, Arabic, French, German, and Spanish, research that is carried out is sometimes criticized for having been conducted in real classrooms and other “natural” instructional settings, with a resulting lack of control over significant variables that may have influenced the outcomes of interest. Alternatively, when conducted under controlled experimental conditions, studies are sometimes criticized for having produced findings that may not generalize to real classrooms. Series of studies of the same phenomena in both natural and artificial instructional environments, utilizing a variety of research methods, are clearly desirable.

Despite these problems, the situation has gradually improved in recent years, with steady growth in the amount and sophistication of research on LT itself, and in disciplines with much to say about the process LT is designed to facilitate, language learning. Of those feeder disciplines, theory and research in some areas of second language acquisition (SLA) are the most directly relevant, but work in psychology, educational psychology, anthropology, curriculum and instruction, and more, is also valuable. This is not to say that all the answers are known, or even that most of them are, but LT prescriptions and proscriptions that ignore theory and research findings in those fields are gradually and justifiably losing credibility. Where they are kept viable, it is chiefly by commercial interests, which still wield enormous influence, and the continued marketability of whose wares is often best served by ignorance about effectiveness.

The authors of each chapter in this volume were asked wherever possible to draw on research findings when making proposals. This, they have done. Also, while many of them specialize in the teaching of English, on which the greatest number of studies have been carried out, and/or operate in English-speaking countries, they were asked not to focus on the teaching of any one language or any one teaching context – foreign, second, lingua franca, etc. – but to choose examples and synthesize research findings and teaching experience from, and relevant to, a variety of languages and settings. They were asked to provide balanced evaluations of major positions and approaches, but granted scope to advance their own views. This, they have also done.

As is visible in the Table of Contents, in addition to coverage of core foundational issues, *The Handbook of Language Teaching* contains chapters on a few topics seldom found in comparable anthologies and textbooks. These chapters reflect recent developments and changing emphases in the field, or ones we believe deserve more attention. Examples include chapters on the language-learning brain; on programs designed specifically for heritage learners, about whom there is now an explosion of (sometimes rather uninformed) writing; on advanced learners; study abroad; third language, conversion, and cross-training programs; LCTLs

(less commonly taught languages), which geopolitics are rapidly making a lot more commonly taught; and (not unrelated) on reading new scripts; as well as on radical language teaching and the diffusion of innovation. In another departure from the norm, instead of one chapter on teaching various skills, and a separate one on testing them, we invited one author to cover both in a single chapter. The idea is to avoid overlap and facilitate greater coherence of treatment. We selected individuals whose prior work showed they can handle both at the required level. While certainly not unique to this volume, there is also expert coverage of the increasingly apparent and important politics and social and political context of language teaching.

One author conspicuously missing from the assembled company is the late Craig Chaudron, a widely respected expert on many aspects of LT, and a valued colleague and close personal friend. Craig had agreed to contribute a chapter to the handbook, but as many readers will know, died unexpectedly in 2006. His untimely passing is a tragic loss for all who knew him, and for the field as a whole. This volume is humbly dedicated to his memory.

NOTES

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1 The following abbreviations are used throughout the volume:

FL – foreign language

L1 – first, or native, language

L2 and SL – second language in the broad sense, including any additional language to the L1

LT – language teaching

SLA – second language acquisition.

Part II Social, Political,
and Educational
Contexts of
Language
Teaching
