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Introduction: What Is Educational Linguistics?

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Education is the lifelong process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits, developing reasoning, and preparing oneself and others for life, encompassing formal schooling, non-formal activities, and informal learning from daily experiences to foster personal growth and societal contribution, often defined as teaching the mind to think, not just memorize facts.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, encompassing its structure (grammar, syntax, phonology), meaning (semantics, pragmatics), and usage across human societies. It analyzes how languages develop, are acquired by children, and change over time, focusing on spoken, written, and signed communication.

Educational Linguistics is an interdisciplinary field situated at the intersection of language studies and education, focusing on the teaching, learning, and role of language in diverse educational settings. It applies linguistic theory, research, and methods to practical issues like curriculum development, literacy, bilingual education, and classroom interaction.

The role of linguistics in education

Linguistics plays a crucial role in education by providing the scientific study of language to improve teaching methodologies, curriculum development, and language acquisition. It enables educators to understand language structures (phonology, syntax, semantics), analyze learner errors, and foster literacy, particularly in multilingual and ESL contexts.

Introduction: What Is Educational Linguistics?

Educational linguistics is an academic field that integrates research, theory, policy, and practice to examine how language is taught and learned (Hornberger, 2022). It emerged alongside sociolinguistics in the 1960s and extends beyond purely linguistic or pedagogical concerns to include how language shapes social identity, meaning, relationships, and context (Hornberger, 2022). This perspective considers not only classroom interactions but also the broader social settings in which language operates, including homes, schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and digital environments, all of which are influenced by power dynamics (Hornberger, 2022).

A central focus of educational linguistics is understanding how language practices affect educational outcomes and social equity. This involves examining which language varieties are privileged and which are marginalized, and how these distinctions shape students' access to education and social mobility (Smitherman, 1979; Fishman, 1982). The field includes scholars who explicitly identify as educational linguists and those who contribute without using that label, such as applied linguists, sociolinguists, and linguistic anthropologists (Hornberger, 2022).

One of the foundational contributions is Dell Hymes's theory of communicative competence, which emphasized that effective communication relies not only on grammatical knowledge but also on understanding the social functions of language (Hymes, 1972). Hymes developed this idea during the U.S. civil rights era, reflecting concerns about how language differences among children from disadvantaged backgrounds could influence their academic success (Hymes, 1972; Cazden, 2011).

Halliday's work on systemic functional linguistics described how children acquire language as a tool for making meaning in social contexts (Halliday, 1975). Jim Cummins introduced the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, showing how proficiency in one language can support learning in another, especially in bilingual education. Heath examined literacy events in home environments, highlighting the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping language learning (Heath, 1982).

Collectively, these works form the foundation of educational linguistics, emphasizing the social nature of language, the importance of linguistic diversity in education, and the ways in which language both reflects and reproduces social structures (Hornberger, 2022)

Educational linguistics is a field that emerged from dissatisfaction with the narrow scope of traditional applied linguistics. The term was first formally proposed by Bernard Spolsky in the 1970s, at a time when applied linguistics was largely equated with foreign language teaching. This reductionist view ignored broader questions about how language shapes access to education, identity, power, and social mobility.

Spolsky argued that applied linguistics had two problems. First, in practice it focused too narrowly on classroom techniques and drills. Second, in theory it became too vague — a

kind of “hyphenated linguistics” that included everything except the core concerns of linguistic theory. Educational linguistics was proposed as a corrective: a field that integrates linguistic theory with real educational problems, without losing analytical rigor.

What made educational linguistics necessary was not just academic dissatisfaction, but global change. Decolonization, mass migration, globalization, and the expansion of schooling systems forced educators to confront multilingualism, minority languages, and unequal access to literacy. Universities and ministries of education began to recognize that language is not just a medium of instruction — it is a gatekeeper. (Spolsky, 1974; Spolsky, 1978; Stubbs, 1986)

Concerning its scope, Educational linguistics sits at the intersection of two domains:

- linguistics** that is relevant to education, and
- education** that is deeply shaped by language.

This means the field is not limited to grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. It includes how language affects subject learning, identity, assessment, policy, and inequality. A famous example used by Spolsky shows this clearly. Immigrant children in Israel with limited Hebrew proficiency performed poorly in mathematics — not because they lacked mathematical ability, but because they lacked the language to access the curriculum. Language here functions as an invisible barrier. If you don’t control the language of schooling, you don’t fully control your academic future.

Spolsky later expanded this into a theory of language policy and management, which includes three interacting components:

- Language practices** — what languages and varieties people actually use.
- Language beliefs** — what people think is “correct,” “valuable,” or “prestigious.”
- Language management** — attempts by institutions (schools, governments, exams) to influence practices and beliefs. (*Spolsky, 1978; Spolsky, 1999; Cooper, 1989*)

Language management is not new. Historically, it began with the preservation of sacred texts. Sanskrit, Arabic, and Hebrew were standardized to protect religious authority. Later, during the rise of nation-states, language became a political weapon. The French Revolution

used schooling to impose standard French. German Romanticism tied language to national identity.

Colonial education systems then used language as a tool of control. Indigenous languages were marginalized. European languages became the language of success, law, and science. After independence, many postcolonial states kept these systems — reproducing inequality through language. Today, schools are still the main institutions shaping how people speak, what they value linguistically, and which identities are rewarded. Educational linguistics studies this process critically. It asks: Who benefits from this language policy? Who is excluded? Who decides what “good language” is? (Spolsky, 1978; Cooper, 1989; Corson, 1997)

One of the most important contributions of educational linguistics is its ethical dimension. Language tests, placement systems, and “standards” are never neutral. They can be used to provide access — or to justify exclusion. For example, immigrant students may be labeled “low ability” when the real issue is lack of access to the dominant language. This shifts responsibility from the system to the learner, which is ethically dangerous. There is also a deep tension between:

1-**Group identity** (national or ethnic languages), and

2-**Individual choice** (what languages people want to learn and use).

Spolsky argues that ethical language policy must balance both. The goal is not to impose a single identity, but to guarantee access while preserving freedom. (Spolsky, 1978)

Educational Linguistics is a broad and interdisciplinary. It embraces many aspects:

First, it builds foundations from neurobiology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, politics, and education systems. This shows that language learning is not just cognitive — it is biological, social, and political at the same time.

Second, it focuses on major themes such as literacy, home–school gaps, language barriers, policy, assessment, and second language acquisition.

Third, it moves into research and practice: task-based learning, classroom interaction, CALL, corpus linguistics, and ecological perspective.

The message is clear: educational linguistics is not a method — it is a framework for understanding education through language. (Spolsky & Hult, 2010; Lo Bianco, 2006) It exists because language is not neutral in education. It structures opportunity. It filters learners. It encodes power. Educational linguistics integrates theory and practice to understand and reshape how education systems use language. Ethical responsibility and pluralism are not optional — they are central. (Spolsky & Hult, 2010)

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