

Summary: On the development of foreign language didactics as a scientific discipline

This monograph presents a synopsis of key advances in the field of foreign language learning and teaching, called foreign language didactics or glottodidactics, understood as an autonomous empirical discipline with pure and applied goals. This is a young discipline with a very long history, but with a rather under-defined status. Because of the challenges to solve practical problems in various educational contexts, this field has been assigned all types of identity, e.g. of a purely practical endeavor, art, commonsense, an area of applications of other, more mature disciplines, an interdisciplinary endeavor, an area to be guided by praxeological or normative or pedagogical theories, or theories imported from other, more mature fields, etc. However, solutions which result from such a treatment of the field lack depth and systematicity, a flaw which cannot be ignored at the time of serious pressures and demands which foreign language learning and teaching must face at present.

The conception of constituting the field of foreign language learning and teaching as a scientific discipline goes back to the contribution of Grucza (1974, 1976a i b, 1978, 1983, 1992, 2007). In a nutshell, his thesis was to turn the problems of foreign language learning and teaching into the subject matter of a discipline called glottodidactics and develop its level of pure and applied research, in which the pure level is aimed at description and explanation, whereas the applied level is geared toward facilitating and stimulating the conditions for language learning in a formal (educational) context. This monograph, however, shows my own perspective of the discipline of foreign language learning and teaching, called foreign language didactics, and its development in recent decades. Its characteristic features are as follows:

- 1) emphasis on the field's links with the past and the present, especially the sociocultural, academic and technological developments; this deep contextualization allows me to regard the foreign language classroom as an integral part of the real world sensitive to social demands for rational foreign language teaching at present;
- 2) the field's cognitive psycholinguistic foundations which highlight our cognitive and communicative functioning; this basis positions the processes of language use and learning as specialization of human information processing for the purpose of verbal communication;
- 3) the discipline's links with the current cognitive conception of science as a specialization of human cognitive processes, especially more complex processes of reasoning; this view defines the operations of scientific research as constructive processes through which scientists interact and communicate with the real world in search of understanding;
- 4) the status of foreign language didactics as a relatively autonomous empirical discipline; this particular format provides constraints to modeling its subject matter, so that the resulting model is sensitive and specific enough to guarantee research operations generating applications;

- 5) the resulting restructuring of the central concept in language sciences, language, and its reformulation as language use, a much more specific notion, yet highly relevant for foreign language didactics in that it necessarily implies the human subject in which language lives and is used.

In order to provide some context in which to characterize the emerging discipline, the first chapter, on searching for practically useful knowledge, presents a brief overview of important developments in the field of foreign language learning and teaching at the end of the XIXth century, in the XXth century and at the turn of the XXIst century. This broad perspective helps to identify three main stages in the development of the field's status: a) the stage in which it defined itself as an area of commonsense; b) the stage of scientific applications and 'methodology' of foreign language teaching; and c) the present stage of the field's emergence as a scientific discipline in its own right. In conclusion it is stressed that applications in such a discipline cannot be regarded as some random, surplus ideas and theories expelled from other, be it more mature fields, but as research findings developed deliberately by a designated empirical discipline with its subject matter defined at a required level of specificity.

In the second chapter, on foreign language didactics in the modern world, I focus more specifically on the difference between the field of foreign language learning and teaching conceived of as 'methodics' or 'foreign language methodology' and the field of foreign language learning and teaching understood as a scientific discipline, called foreign language didactics. The chapter also shows some of the important challenges posed by information society in our globalized world, which cannot be ignored by this discipline. It is argued that these challenges can be addressed adequately by the field defined as a science, because – unlike other formats of the field – only this science offers prospects of understanding language learning and teaching as a phenomenon in the real world and generate applications on the basis of this understanding. Various developments in the field of foreign and second language teaching, which focus on learner autonomy or content, are significant and very interesting, but not sufficiently comprehensive to provide a rational framework for foreign language instruction in the educational setting.

Chapter three, on determinants of the subject matter of foreign language didactics, deals with several constraints, grouped as external and internal, which must be selected for the purpose of modeling the subject matter of the discipline in question for this discipline to meet the demands for practically useful knowledge. These constraints target the subject matter in the world of phenomena of verbal communication and lead to representing the subject matter as an empirical, i.e. spatiotemporal system. In the subsequent chapter, on the discipline of foreign language didactics as a 'normal' science, a closer look is taken at the internal diversification of levels and goals of a scientific discipline within which the model incorporating the above constraints is supposed to function. In chapter five I present key tenets of the cognitive conception of science which outline a balanced set of expectations toward foreign language didactics as a scientific discipline: in my view, this conception is helpful in avoiding the pitfalls of extreme absolutism as well as relativism in dealing with the power of science. Chapter six is devoted to mapping the territory of foreign language didactics, targeting the cognitive equipment for human information processing of the language learner and focusing on the main features of verbal communication, the phenomenon which central to its concerns. In this section, I stress the fact that we are involved in verbal communication with our entire bodies and minds and the main 'commodity' of this phenomenon is meaning. Language forms, which serve the purpose of coding meanings, are subordinated to meaning in the process of communication in that they are selected by the subject on the basis of the communicative intention constructed in the given communicative act.

The monograph ends with a list of questions which are fundamental for foreign language teaching and which refer to the understanding of the phenomenon of (non-primary) language use and learning; they refer to its nature and location, its flow and its structure, as well as the nature of changes which take place in this phenomenon, and finally, the strategies of cultivating this phenomenon in the educational setting. The last section provides a characterization of language use which is relevant to the discipline's subject matter, which includes twenty properties distinctive of language use in the context of communication. This characterization can be treated as an extended definition of language use developed for the purposes of foreign language didactics with a more mature sense of academic identity and purpose in the present world.