

# OLD PROBLEMS, NEW CHALLENGES

On the future of teaching German as a national language

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## Abstract

Although comparative studies on L1 education are facing many new challenges today, two 'old' issues should not be forgotten: the professional qualification of teachers as part of their academic training, and elementary language education in primary schools. These issues need a theoretical foundation to make L1 education part of the professional practical knowledge of teachers.

In Germany, there is a gap between the subject-related qualification of prospective teachers on the one hand, and their didactic qualification for their professional field of action in schools on the other. What is perceived today as L1 German teaching from school year 1 to 12/13 goes back to two different traditions for which, until a few decades ago, educational institutions of varying prestige were responsible: the *Volksschulen* (elementary education for the lower classes) initially focusing on "mother-tongue" monolingualism, and the Latin schools (grammar schools for the higher classes) focusing on multilingual education, preparing for academic careers. It was not until the Weimar Constitution in 1919 that Germany also introduced academic qualifications for teachers in elementary education. However, also seminars, pedagogical academies, and colleges that focused on teaching didactics mainly, were established to circumvent university qualifications.

What was developed in the last third of the 20th century in the context of a scientific foundation for the didactics of L1 German has since fallen into oblivion. This contribution aims at presenting a critically reflected continuation of these developments.

Keywords: teacher education, scientific foundation of L1 didactics, monolingual vs multilingual education, subject-related qualification vs didactic qualification of L1 teachers

1

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The education system in Germany is in crisis. The problems in schools for general education, however, are not new. The fact that at the end of primary school a considerable number of students fail to meet the minimum standards in reading, writing, and arithmetic was already suspected fifty years ago and has now also been empirically documented by the PISA studies (Baumert et al., 2001). This failure has led to some changes in the curricula of German schools, but it has not led German didactics to reconsider its customary ways of thinking and acting. Also, the large number of competing didactic concepts that meanwhile have been presented, didn't lead to an improvement of L1 German teaching. The current situation is aggravated by the lack of qualified teachers. Available positions cannot be filled because there is an insufficient number of young people interested in teacher education programs. As a possible way out of this problem, it is even being discussed now if it would not be better to separate the subject-related qualification of teachers from their didactic qualification.

Such separation would not be too much of a risk for the subject-related qualification of prospective teachers of L1 German in higher secondary education, because the knowledge to be imparted there might be far removed in scope, but certainly not in nature, from the content of traditional and contemporary German academic studies: almost all of it can be "didacticized", i.e., trimmed down for classroom use. The situation is different, however, with respect to the subject-related qualification of teachers for primary and lower secondary education. It is well-known that there exists a considerable gap between these teachers' subject knowledge and the kind of subject knowledge that ought to be taught in schools (Granzow-Emden, 1999; Hochstadt, 2022). To address this gap as a discrepancy between "theory" and "practice" falls short in as far as it assumes that the corresponding "theory" is explicitly related to the field of practice and that it only requires sufficient practical experience to bridge the gap (Haueis, 2022). To be able to do so, however, one would have to be sure that the necessary theoretically based subject knowledge is designed in such a way that its scope, nature, and function are adapted to the prerequisites and learning possibilities of children that enter school for the first time.

## 2. GERMAN DIDACTICS: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

Even with some doubts about the extent to which language use can be influenced by the systematic teaching of declarative knowledge, teachers ought to be qualified to reliably identify linguistic difficulties that arise in students and to address these difficulties in the classroom. This cannot be done adequately, however, within the framework of grammar that curricula and textbooks provide for L1 German lessons. For example, the area of word change through inflection is only partly included in the declarative meta-linguistic knowledge that is presented, although this area is

particularly prone to errors: of the categories that determine nominal inflection, only number and gender are explicitly considered, while case is only mentioned indirectly when it is about identifying different complements to the verb (Granzow-Emden, 1999). Also, the inflection of adjectives between a determiner and a noun remains unmentioned, although at least some practical exercises in this area would be indispensable, especially for children from migrant families. Syntactic aspects too, are largely neglected by school grammar in the canon of learning subjects. Here, syntax is understood to be nothing more than the study of “sentence structure”, meaning the division of the whole sentence into smaller units and their naming. What is also remarkable here, is the difference to the terminology of Latin syntax. The fact that words are connected to syntagms and that in German, if they are sentence elements, they can take up different positions in the sentence, is still not part of the knowledge that one can take for granted in prospective German teachers (Hochstadt, 2021).

The fact that teachers do not—or cannot—optimally use in their practical work the linguistic knowledge they have acquired in their German studies is not only to be seen as a problem of the limited duration of these studies and the limited attention given to this knowledge. It should also be considered that linguistic knowledge appears to them as a kind of “dead knowledge” without any visible relationship to its later application in the fields of action at school (Funke, 2000). In the professional qualification of teachers, it would therefore be most important to impart the necessary linguistic knowledge and language skills in connection with dealing with the difficulties that come to light in their pupils' written work.

For a better understanding of the above sketched situation, it is important to take the following issues into account.

- 1) What is perceived today as L1 German lessons from the 1st to the 12th/13th school year can be traced back—depending on the type of school—to two different traditions for which, until a few decades ago, educational institutions of varying prestige were responsible (Haukeis, 2016, pp. 108-116, pp. 129-148). One of them, the *Volksschule*, is a continuation of the urban writing schools of the early modern period where people from the lower classes initially acquired very simple skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Due to the new technology of printing, the religious demands of Protestantism, and the first grammars that were introduced, these schools increasingly also included teaching the ability to read texts. The other tradition was anchored in the teaching of Latin to aspiring clerics and secular scholars. This was first taught in monasteries, then (in preparation for university studies) in Latin schools, the forerunners of today's higher secondary education. The teachers in these schools were always recruited among university graduates and, from the early Middle Ages onwards, dealt with the reading and writing of Latin texts in the sub-disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. The German language (and literature) as a subject of instruction however, only very gradually found its way into these

institutions (Ludwig, 1988). Even at the beginning of the 19th century, compulsory German lessons at grammar schools had not yet become established everywhere, and the qualification for teaching German, in the first half of the century was still considered to be provided by studying Latin and Greek (Bürmann, 1978). The concept of a “monolingual habitus” of German teaching that has been criticized by Gogolin (1994) therefore mainly finds its origin in the monolingual organization of the *Volksschule*.

- 2) It took until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century before there was any thought of an institutional training for teachers recruited to teach at primary schools. Even in the 19th century, such institutions were not equally widespread in all regions. Moreover, the official regulations of some *Länder* (federal states) in Germany explicitly excluded professional qualifications for "mother tongue" teaching (Fertig, 1979; Gessinger, 1980; Wille, 1988). This only changed at the beginning of the 20th century with the introduction of compulsory schooling for all children in the first four years of elementary education. In addition, the Weimar Constitution (1919, Article 143, 2) introduced academic qualifications for teachers at all types of schools. Referring to the position of the German philosopher and educationalist Eduard Spranger (1920), it was however possible, and common practice almost throughout Germany, to circumvent the university qualification of teachers in elementary education. Only in the regions governed by Prussia, *Pädagogische Akademien* (academies of education) were established that had scientific pretensions and founded professorships for subject didactics. These academies were then closed by the national-socialist government and replaced everywhere by science-free "seminars" that offered practical vocational training for prospective teachers. This only changed—at different speeds in different regions—in the 1960s. A few examples may illustrate this development. In the large territorial states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony, *Pädagogische Hochschulen* (teacher training colleges) took over the legacy of the former academies of education and were given the right to award first- and second-degree doctorates as early as around 1970. It was in this context that the first efforts were made to establish a scientific foundation for teaching German across school levels and forms. In Bavaria on the other hand, the newly established teacher training colleges were non-scientific institutes of neighbouring universities that initially were not affiliated to the universities as faculties of education. Also, the teacher training colleges in Baden-Württemberg, although they were founded with academic aspirations and professorships in subject didactics in the mid-1960s, were restricted in the exercise of academic rights for the qualification of young academics until around 1990. In international documents, these teacher training colleges are nowadays called Universities of Education. Since the 1990s, except for Baden-Württemberg, the academic qualification of teachers for all teaching

professions in Germany takes place at universities—with an institutional separation of subject-specific science and subject-specific didactics. This separation does not exist at the Universities of Education that are responsible for all teaching professions except for higher secondary education.

- 3) Because of the long-standing regional diversity in the institutional allocation of teacher training and the accompanying scholarly perspective on German didactics, it was rather difficult—but not impossible—to establish a theoretical foundation for teaching L1 German in primary and secondary education. Those efforts initially depended on scattered publications, individual initiatives and efforts, and supra-regional personal contacts and exchanges, which led to the first public *Symposium Deutschdidaktik* (Symposium on German Didactics) at Lüneburg in 1979 and the founding, at the suggestion of Hubert Ivo, professor in the Didactics of German Language and Literature, of an association of the same name a few years later. This association was preceded by a few initiatives in the 1970s, when Dietrich Boueke started to establish a scientific infrastructure through publishing the *Bibliographie Deutschunterricht* (Bibliography of Teaching German) and the anthologies *Deutschunterricht in der Diskussion* (Teaching German under Discussion). The scope of these publications and their lifespan however, turned out to be limited, and nothing comparable is available today. What has been achieved in terms of a scientific foundation of German didactics in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has meanwhile faded into oblivion instead of having found a critically reflected continuation.
- 4) With the removal of subject didactics to universities, what had already been developed in German didactics without strict ties to universities, only occasionally found its way into academic German studies, simply because the conditions for such collaboration were missing. Additional obstacles for combining German didactics and German studies were the strict separation of language and literature in German studies, and the institutional separation of L1 German subject knowledge and L1 German subject-specific didactics at most universities (Haeuëis, 2022). Although this separation has enabled German didactics to initiate better-equipped empirical research projects, such projects are nowadays stronger related to guidelines from psychology or educational sciences than to the still unresolved theoretical problems of German subject didactics.

### 3. GERMAN TEACHING AND DIDACTIC MODELLING OF LINGUSTIC KNOWLEDGE

As a consequence of the above status quo, two questions have only been marginally addressed so far. They are however of fundamental didactic importance and can only be answered from within the subject. The first question concerns the theory-based

prerequisites for fruitful empirical research on L1 German teaching; the second concerns the scientifically grounded didactic modelling of linguistic knowledge and language skills for teachers and learners in primary and lower secondary schools.

Subject-specific empirical research on L1 German language teaching— independent of psychologically and pedagogically controlled performance measurements and intervention studies—was already initiated in the 1970s by Hubert Ivo (1977). He proposed to focus on "didactic customs", i.e., the routines of established didactic thinking and practice in relation to the content of L1 German teaching, and to consider these as the object of scientific inquiry in such a way that the sociogenesis of the routines established in the school subject could come into view (Hauéis, 2015). This ambition could not be fulfilled within the paradigm of purely descriptive empirical research, it however fitted the concept of professional practical knowledge (Anderson-Levitt, 1987) that had been introduced in international comparative research on teaching the national language as proposed by the International Mother Tongue Education Network (see for an overview in Herrlitz et al., 2007). Herrlitz (1994, 1998) has insisted on understanding teachers' professional practical knowledge not only as a sheer collection of teachers' remarks about their work, but on reconstructing it in such a way that it can serve as a theoretical basis for empirical research that focuses on the exploration of the invisible conditions of what in observable teaching practices only appears as "tips of the icebergs". Herrlitz (1994) used this metaphor to stipulate that the institutional conditions of education and its underlying traditions of thinking are beneath the surface of observable classroom practice and are therefore not accessible for direct observation. The underlying, or in Herrlitz's terms, "metonymic structure" of teaching cannot be directly observed. If it is ignored, however, the observed classroom events can only be described, but not really be understood (see also Herrlitz, 2007).

The second unresolved theoretical problem is even more serious. It didn't receive much attention, as long as German teaching was unreservedly understood as "mother-tongue" teaching. In the contemporary German migration society, referring to German as the students' mother tongue, has become counterfactual. It must however be remembered that the idea of "mother tongue teaching" derives from its historical origin of literacy education for the masses. As such it consisted in experiencing and teaching the written form of the oral vernacular. In a culturally and linguistically largely homogeneous environment, this could be achieved to some extent through an appropriate organisation of schools and certain measures in teacher training which made it possible to achieve a high degree of homogeneity in classrooms with respect to regional dialect, religion, gender, and cultural background of the student population, and it was relatively easy for teachers to begin with experiences that were familiar to all children in the same way.

This approach, however, started to lose its self-evidence during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to massive labour migration from the countryside to the industrial cities and later also the flight, expulsion, and evacuation of large groups of

people during the Second World War. The resulting "internal multilingualism", i.e., the coexistence of varieties of German in classrooms, did not fundamentally challenge the "mother tongue" foundation of L1 German teaching, but it did lead to theoretical models that were intended to enable children to acquire the written language "on the basis of an open, operative didactics" (Glinz, 1969). Teaching grammar understood in this way was based by Hans Glinz (1969) on discovery procedures for the acquisition of a cognitively well-embedded metalinguistic awareness. These approaches were however forgotten, rather than adopted, when due to labour migration in the 1970s the internal linguistic diversity in classrooms changed into "external multilingualism".

Against the background of the vernacular foundation of teaching the national language on the one hand and the new and increasing linguistic diversity in classrooms on the other, the fundamental question has to be asked whether the dialects, sociolects, and also ethnolects, brought into schools by the students, should be regarded as deficits that have to be remedied by compensatory measures, or rather as resources that have to be accepted, respected, and developed in the classroom. Within the first option, the deficit perspective, the vernacular (own language) foundation and the associated pedagogical consequences become less important. The second option, however, the superdiversity perspective (Vertovec, 2007), requires an explicit theoretical effort: it's about finding out how linguistic knowledge and skills can be modelled in such a way that they become accessible for beginning students based on their prior linguistic experiences.

Didactic modelling that faces this challenge sees appropriation processes, or learning, as an interplay between sociogenesis and ontogenesis (Haueis, 2013, 2016). The general framework for this approach has already been established decades ago by the cultural-historical school of psychology in the circle of Lev S. Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1986; see also Tomasello, 2019 for an application in the field of evolutionary anthropology). Vygotsky saw cognitive and affective development as the active acquisition of skills based on culturally mediated experiences. Accordingly, his "zone of proximate development" is to be considered as an anticipatory design of teaching and learning, which takes the preceding processes of appropriation into account. In this perspective, appropriation processes would be envisaged under three aspects: (1) the modelling of the learning objects, (2) their situational and communicative framing, and (3) the role of anticipation in the progress of development. The first aspect should be one of the most important issues in subject related didactic theories. Whereas mathematics and science subjects have clearly benefited from proposals for a didactic modelling of learning objects to be attainable from the students' perspective, this hardly plays a role in L1 German teacher training and L1 German teaching practice (Bräuer, 2016). As a consequence, the teaching of largely "dead knowledge" has hardly changed until today. These theoretical omissions in L1 German subject didactics potentially lead to a social disadvantage of children who can find little (language) support in their families.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Under the current political and economic conditions, teaching L1 German, just like national language teaching in other countries, is not to be taken for granted (Bräuer, 2016; Gogolin, 1994; Haueis, 2022; Herrlitz, 1998; Maas, 2008). Recent processes of globalization, digitalization, and an increasing linguistic and cultural diversity pose inescapable challenges for teaching the respective national languages in Europe.

Globalization puts the privileging of existing national languages up for discussion in several respects: in Germany not only because of the language-political disinterest in linguistic diversity and because of global economic pressures, but also because of a strong linguistic and language-didactic critique of a supposed "linguisticism", i.e., the devaluation of languages other than the European languages as a heritage from colonialism. Subject didactics would therefore have to clarify whether and how in this context the vernacular foundation of our written culture should be maintained. Linguistic diversity in an immigration country like Germany enriches its already existing "internal multilingualism" with ethnolects. Subject didactics should face the question of whether these varieties should be considered as resources for learning or as deficits. The answer to this question has consequences for teacher education.

Digitalization influences the relationship between orality and literality in as far as the principally monological character of written textuality is losing importance outside schools due to the increasing number of short texts for self-presentation that appear in "social networks" (Januschek, 2022). This affects the requirements for the coherence of written texts and reduces their syntactic complexity. Subject didactics would have to consider the consequences of digitalization for reading and writing skills.

Another element of globalization is the worldwide regime of performance measurement and how it has affected curricula for national language teaching. Two findings are noteworthy here.

- 1) The responsibility for teaching the writing skills that are the subject of international performance measures is spread across several subjects. Instruction in the national language therefore seems to become less important. One might wonder whether this means that not only the national language's attachment to the nation is at stake here, but also its epistemological foundation as an independent school subject (see also Ongstad, this special issue).
- 2) The teaching of literature is being greatly reduced in some countries. It only occurs marginally in elementary education, and only in the higher forms of secondary education are literary texts treated as works of art (see also Van Keulen & Spotti, this special issue).

For the most part, German didactics prefers to be satisfied with the body of knowledge as it is provided in current curricula, and to conduct research under the escort of educational psychology without any further subject-related theoretical



reflection. Compulsory German lessons at our schools then only seem to be legitimized by the sheer fact that they exist.

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