Language Learning Skills & Materials (Oracy and Literacy)
CHAPTER 1

N. Sifakis

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General Introduction to the ÒLanguage SkillsÓ Module
II Volumes I and II

Welcome to the ÒLanguage SkillsÓ Module! The purpose of this introduction is to clarify a few important aspects of this Study Guide as well as of the entire Module that will help you better organise your study and prepare for the written and oral assignments. Please take some time to carefully read what follows before you begin your reading of the Study Guide.

Components

This Module consists of the following parts:

– The Study Guide, which has been written by specialised researchers, all experienced HOU tutors, follows the distance learning methodology and is scheduled to guide you throughout your study. The Study Guide is the backbone of your study for this Module and should be the primary resource.

– The Readers, which are independent books that have been recently published by well-known researchers and cover each of the four skills presented in this Module. It should be stressed that the Readers themselves have not been written specifically with this M.Ed.Ys overall aims and contextual constraints in mind or for distance learning purposes. They are therefore only to be consulted when this is explicitly mentioned in the Study Guide. Please be sure to only refer to the Readers when specifically told to do so II this should save up a lot of your valuable study time (and study load). Remember that, for this M.Ed. programme, the major priority is the ability to handle information critically and to refer everything that you read to your own teaching situation and previous experience.

– The Reader Guide, which is a separate little booklet containing numbered references to specific sections or pages of each of the Readers. Please consult the Reader Guide when told to do so in the specific ÒInput ReadingÓ sections of your Study Guide.

– The Parallel Texts, which are all the related bibliographical material that you should also consult in order to better and more fully appreciate the content of what you read. These texts are not provided for by the HOU in their entirety, but you will find a lot of the material that you need in the HOU library and in the electronic versions of specific journals (accessed for free from HOU-

\[1\] For more information, please visit the HOU library site, on [http://lib.eap.gr/e-journals.htm](http://lib.eap.gr/e-journals.htm).
based PCs^1). Please also note that the Course Handbook contains important information for some of the required pre-reading material for this Module. It is understood that such pre-reading material is covered before the beginning of this Module. You are also advised to purchase these books and use them for reference purposes.

**Aims of the Study Guide**

It is important to view the Study Guide of this Module in two ways: on the one hand, as a reference, a repository of the main ideas prevalent in the Readers and articles referred to in the Module; and on the other hand, as a step-by-step exposition of issues that either do not receive (in the Readers) the attention that we consider appropriate for this M.Ed. or are entirely absent from the Readers altogether. Another priority of the Study Guide is to facilitate your overall study and preparation for the assignments by providing gradual guidance in asking you to carry out specific activities. These activities are called, in the distance education parlance of this programme, SAQs, or self-assessment questions (see below for more on those).

With these in mind, the two volumes of the Study Guide aim to introduce you to:

- the basic elements of foreign language teaching, with a focus on English
- the processes involved in the production and perception of language (speech and writing),
- the methodological processes of teaching (and, to some extent, assessing) the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

**Layout**

The Study Guide is laid out as follows:

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Let us take a closer look at the outline of each chapter. **Chapter 1** aims to introduce you to some of the key concepts of language teaching (such as TlearningY, TL1Y, TL2Y, Tnative speakerY etc.) and asks you to reflect on your own teaching situation. It provides a number of tools with which to better understand your teaching situation and comprehensively position it within the wider area of English language teaching around the world. It does so by referring to areas such as the Common European Framework and lesson planning. In this way, Chapter 1 should be seen as a more general introduction to the entire M.Ed. programme.

In **Chapter 2** (which refers to the Skills module proper), you are introduced to the basic similarities and differences between spoken and written discourse. **Chapter 3** is concerned with the oracy skills, i.e., listening and speaking, and draws some fundamental concerns with regard to the differences and similarities between real-world and classroom discourse, the roles of listeners and speakers and teacher- and learner- talk. **Chapter 4** discusses the development and processes of the listening skill and does so by juxtapositing L1 and L2 listening and by presenting the various micro- or sub- skills involved. Then, in **Chapter 5**, you are introduced to the ways and means whereby the listening skill is (and should be) taught and, also, to more specific ways of structuring, adapting and creating listening texts and activities. **Chapter 6** refers to the speaking processes, presenting issues that have to do with the concepts of TspeechY and TspeakingY and discussing, in particular, the mechanisms responsible for the production of speech sounds, speech acquisition and learning, and the relationship between speaking and communicating in L1 and L2. Volume 1 ends with **Chapter 7**, which concentrates on the teaching of the speaking skill Ð here, a distinction is made between TrealY and TrealisticY speech and a detailed framework for classifying and developing communicative activities for speaking is laid out.

The second volume of this module is dedicated to the discussion of the reading and writing skills. **Chapter 8** aims to introduce you to issues regarding literacy in general. **Chapter 9** discusses the nature of the reading skill in L1 and L2 and is also concerned with presenting in depth certain implications for the teaching of this skill. **Chapter 10** turns to a discussion of writing and focuses on presenting the text-based, writer-based and reader-based approaches, together with the methodological implications of each approach. Finally, **Chapter 11** rounds up your study of this module by raising your awareness of the intricate and, at times, potentially misleading relationships that hold between teaching, testing and assessment in language learning.

Inevitably, a lot of the information provided in these two volumes is bound to be recycled, or, better, seen through the prism of each different skill and with the eyes
of each different specialist-author. Your own task is to filter everything that you read by referring it to your own teaching experience and related readings and by critically reflecting on these associations. After all, as you will see, the structure and writing approach of these materials prioritises such active reflection. Let us briefly see how.

**Distance Learning Methodology**

Studying in distance learning (DL) mode means that most of the required study is done individually and without the constant help of an on-site tutor. This raises certain implications for the DL material. Essentially, the DL material should act out various different roles: the following three are among the most important:

- lay out the content of the subject-matter, and do so in a way that would be accessible to all DL students; this makes the material more reader-friendly;
- chunk the content of the subject-matter in a way that typical DL students (i.e., adults with full-time jobs and many other responsibilities) can handle in relatively short study sessions; this makes the material more analytic and chunky;
- ask DL students to carry out activities that would prompt them to both use their previous knowledge and experience and critically reflect on (and assess for themselves) the extent to which they are making progress with their study; this means that the material will also have a strong counselling function;

In line with the above, the beginning of each DL chapter of this Study Guide has the following structure:

- **General aims of this chapter:** This very short section (3 to 5 lines) has the gist of the chapter.
- **Expected outcomes/objectives:** This is a very important section, because it openly notifies you of the issues you should understand and master on finishing the study of the entire chapter. It is crucial that you return to these objectives when you finish the chapter to reflect on the extent to which you have actually covered the required aims.
- **Key words:** In this section, you can find all of the important terms to be presented, defined and analysed in the chapter. Remember that you are expected to be able to use these terms in various ways in the written and oral assignments, the contact sessions, your communication with your tutor and fellow students, etc.
- **Introductory remarks:** Here you are briefly introduced to the contents of the different sections of the chapter. In certain cases, you will find additional information regarding your DL study of the chapter here. After this section, the chapter-proper begins!
At the end of the main content of the chapter you will also find the following:

- **A Synopsis** of the chapter, where the key issues raised in the chapter are replicated. This is another means of quickly and efficiently reminding yourselves of the main objectives and outcomes of each chapter.

- **Answers to SAQs**: This is the area where the key to most SAQs presented in the chapter is to be found.

- **References**: In this area you will find all the bibliographical information that is referred to in the chapter. For your convenience, each chapter has its own references section.

- **Further Reading**: Here you will find details concerning books (or articles) that you might like to consult if you are interested in areas that have been either extensively discussed or merely raised in the chapter.

### Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs)

We have already stressed the very important function of the various activities that you are asked to carry out in each chapter. Depending on the case, SAQs are constructed to help you in the following areas of your study:

- **Orientation of issues whose discussion follows**: certain activities raise your awareness of issues prior to their fuller discussion (this is achieved by asking you to jot down your thoughts and experiences on certain issues);

- **Input reading**: certain activities are paired with your input reading and aim to help you make notes and appreciate the content of articles, chapters, extracts from coursebooks, and so on; it should be noted that an attempt has been made to structurally distinguish Input Readings from SAQs, so that you know exactly what you're expected to do at each stage of your study;

- **Content application**: other activities help you check your own understanding of the issues raised, by asking you, for example, to apply or extract criteria for the evaluation of materials; in this case, SAQs are more structured (e.g., in the form of tables) and their key is provided either at the end of the chapter or in the text that immediately follows the SAQ rubric; and

- **Assignment preparation**: although most activities can be used, to a more or less extent, in the preparation of your assignments, certain activities make clear reference to the actions you should be performing (e.g., making notes, taking decisions, structuring, etc.) at each stage of your reading.

All SAQs have some sort of feedback, which is provided either at the end of the chapter or immediately after the SAQ rubric. In every case, you are informed of the place of such feedback at the end of each activity. Please try your best to take the time to carry out every SAQ remembering, of course, that, as already mentioned,
not all SAQs are the same. It would also be helpful if you make sure you have an empty notebook where you can scribble down your answers to certain SAQs, or even your thoughts and reactions to what you read. You will find that this can help you significantly in your preparation for the various assignments. There are special instructions on how best to go about making these notes in the Study Guide.

**Input reading**

Our experience from the programme so far shows that maximum study results are achieved if one first consults the Study Guide and then refers to any related reading material. This ensures that the student will form a cogent idea of the various issues raised in a way that will also help him/her preparing towards the assignments. For this reason, in the Study Guide you are continuously advised when and what exactly you should read. What has been termed "Input Reading" forms the backbone of your study and should be carefully read. Additional material on specific areas of interest that you might like to consult in addition to your core study is also found in the so-called "Further Reading" sections at the end of every chapter.

**Assignments and study**

You will have to carry out four assignments for this Module. Although this Module has been written with various assignments in mind, these assignments are not always directly referred to. This is done on purpose, as assignments may (and indeed will) change from year to year, to ensure that the quality of all written assignments for the M.Ed. is high. You will receive detailed information about these assignments from your tutors, at the contact sessions and on the Internet.

It is also advisable to regularly consult (a) the Course Handbook, for further details regarding the overall layout of the programme and (b) the study schedules that are available online, for detailed information on the organisation of your study for this Module (e.g., assignments, chapters to be covered every month, contact and telephone sessions, etc).

Last but not least: make sure to find a way to liaise with your fellow-students. Experience shows that best results occur when different students get together and form small study groups, to cope with the study load (e.g., making notes on and "absorbing" the input reading) and exchange viewpoints and experiences (e.g., by applying the various theoretical frameworks to their different situations and reflecting on these applications).

Good luck with your study!

_N. C. Sifakis_