

# LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS AN EXAMPLE OF DEVELOPING DISCIPLINARY LITERACY AND ACADEMIC WRITING<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper presents the case study of the coursework of 'Introduction to Linguistics' (University of Tartu), which seeks to intertwine teaching subject-specific knowledge with developing disciplinary literacy. In their linguistic autobiography, the students analyze their language-related experiences and memories in the context of linguistic knowledge covered in the lectures and academic sources. To guide them through this task, we use problem-based learning, scaffolding, process writing, and peer feedback. This way, the students gain a thorough and practical understanding of the main concepts of linguistics while also learning academic reading and writing.

While we currently have experience using the linguistic autobiography only as coursework for first-year undergraduates, we consider this task suitable for primary and secondary education, as well. Developing the skills of reading, writing and critical thinking this way prepares adolescents for university studies. In addition, teaching writing from sources and disciplinary literacy from early on creates a supportive environment for a future generation of researchers to feel at home with academic writing and scientific communication.

Keywords: key competencies, generic skills, disciplinary literacy, writing from sources, linguistics

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the key academic competencies [1]. However, it is also one of the most advanced cognitive development levels [2], and, as Kruse [1] has pointed out, European universities leave students largely to figure this process out on their own. The main hardships students face in academic writing include lacking disciplinary knowledge, misunderstanding the purpose of writing, and, perhaps most importantly, misjudging the connection between reading and writing [1]. The importance of teaching students to read right in the first place is also emphasized by Bean & Melzer [3], who identify misunderstanding the reading process and the lack of disciplinary knowledge and vocabulary [3] among the reasons why students struggle with academic reading and, eventually, academic writing.

Teaching academic reading and academic writing come together in the concept of disciplinary literacy, which emphasizes that students must understand where the knowledge of their lectures and textbooks comes from. Thus, disciplinary literacy seeks to teach the students "how to access, interpret, challenge, and reconstruct the texts of the disciplines" [4]. Although disciplinary literacy assumes that knowledge-producing through disciplinary writing is simply one part of human interaction [4], it is also a highly specific skill that takes years of training to develop. This specificity is supported by Shanahan & Shanahan's [5] ranking of disciplinary literacy as the highest form of literacy. It should thus be up to professors to integrate disciplinary literacy - reading, writing, subject knowledge, and critical thinking - into their courses. As we are trying to show in this case study of our course "Introduction to Linguistics" (see also [6]), the best way for this integration is to link "course concepts to students' personal experiences or previously existing knowledge" [3].

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## 2 METHODOLOGY

„Introduction to Linguistics” is a 3 ECTS introductory course at the University of Tartu, Estonia. It is mandatory for students from various majors (Linguistics, Literature, Foreign Languages and Literature, Educational Sciences), and every year approximately 250 students, mostly 1st-year undergraduate students, take this course. Divided into four clusters, the course introduces the main branches, concepts, and functions of modern linguistics:

1. Psycholinguistics and the languages of the world (subtopics: *language acquisition and learning, first words, language environment and contact, multilingualism, areal and genealogical classification of languages, language endangerment*);
2. Semantics and pragmatics (subtopics: *homonymy, polysemy, change of meaning, a discourse linguistics’ analysis of a text or conversation*);
3. Language typology (subtopics: *phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, describing a language from morphosyntactic aspects, phonetic analysis of the spelling errors, comparing languages through grammatical categories*);
4. Sociolinguistics and onomastics (subtopics: *language variation, dialects, working with informants, structure and etymology of names*).

Acknowledging the diverse student body and that “Introduction to Linguistics” is one of the first courses for these students in the university, the course can be seen as an opportunity to introduce students to linguistics and academic writing simultaneously. Hence, for this course, students are assigned the task of writing a linguistic autobiography. In this task, they are asked to analyze their personal language-related experiences using the linguistic knowledge acquired from lectures and academic sources. For example, when we cover the process of language acquisition in the lectures, the students are asked to describe aspects related to their own language acquisition (how old were they during different phases of language acquisition; what were their first words and utterances; did they have problems with pronunciation, categorization, etc.). The students are expected to describe and classify those personal experiences in an objective scientific manner, using academic sources and disciplinary vocabulary.

The subject-specific aim of guiding the students to write their linguistic autobiography is to help them find connections between linguistics and their personal experience with language, thus simultaneously acquiring the subject-specific knowledge and ways of applying it in analysis. On the other hand, the broader aim of this coursework is to develop students’ understanding of academic writing and their disciplinary literacy in Linguistics

To make the task more accessible, the autobiography is written in four parts, all of which have several subparts according to the abovementioned topics covered in lectures. For every part, there is a specific task with scaffolding-style guiding questions (see Example 1), a list of suggested sources, and a list of terms. E.g., the task shown in example 1 came with 28 related terms and 6 sources, including textbooks, articles, and links to databases. Using at least two sources and at least two terms from the given list is mandatory in every subtopic. Through this, the students do not only learn to read and analyze academic sources but also develop an understanding of what academic texts in the discipline should look like and how they could produce one themselves, thus taking the first steps towards disciplinary literacy (see [4]).

*Example 1. The guidelines given to the students for the 3rd draft’s 3rd subtopic (comparing languages through grammatical categories).*

*Compare grammatical categories of Estonian with one (or more) other language(s) you have learned. Use WALS (World Atlas of Language Structures, <https://wals.info>) and up-to-date academic descriptions of the Estonian language.*

*Describe how morphemes are added to words in these languages.*

*How are these languages classified according to their structural features (linguistic typology)?*

*Which grammatical categories are present in these languages, and how are these categories marked?*

*What made learning this foreign language easy for you (for example, the similarities with your mother tongue)? What made it difficult? Are these things somehow related to the differences or similarities in grammatical categories of those languages?*

For every part (see Figure 1 for the course outline), the students submit a new draft where they add new topics but also revise and resubmit the previous ones according to the feedback they have received. For two drafts (1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>), they receive feedback from teaching assistants. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> drafts, they work in 4–5-member writing groups and give feedback to each other (for benefits of process writing and peer review, see [7]). The possibility of consulting with the teaching assistant is also provided.

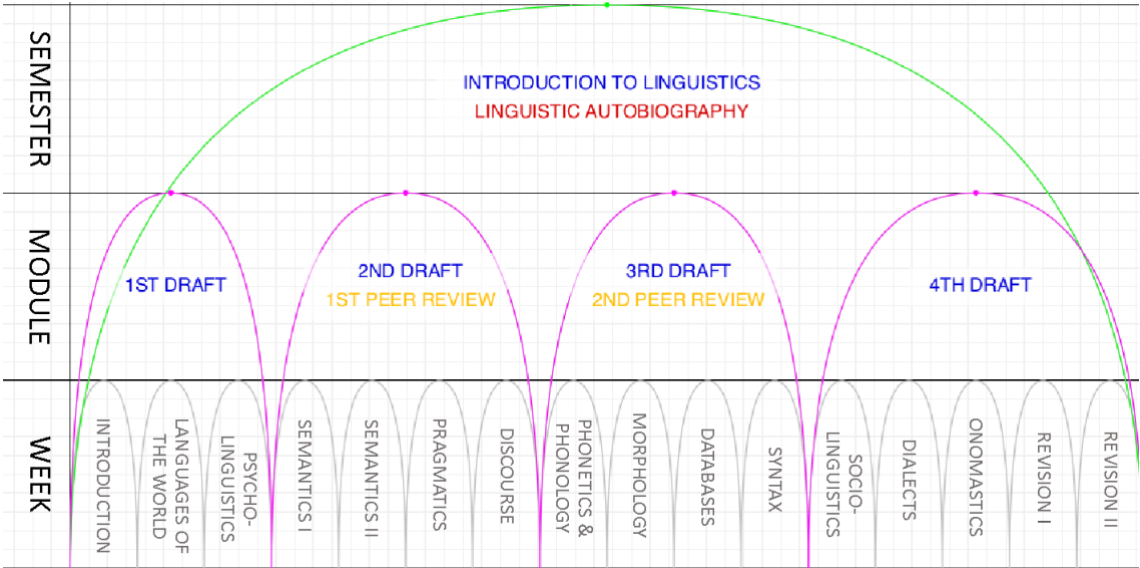


Figure 1. Course outline as a learning arch. Created in LearningArches by Kaospilot. [6]

Final paper, comprised of the four previous drafts and expected to be around 1800-2200 words, are then assessed using a standardized point matrix. Students can get a maximum of 54 points for the content, sources, terms, and (where applicable) examples used in the subtopics (see Table 1).

Table 1. The division of points by subtopics and subskills. The number in each cell shows the maximum number of points possible. Points are reduced by a step of 1 or, in some categories, 0.5 if there is a minor shortcoming. In subtopics without a separate category for examples, they are evaluated together with the analysis.

Topic	Analysis	Sources	Terms	Examples	SUM
Psycholinguistics	3	2	2	N/A	7
Phonetic Analysis	1	1	1	N/A	3
Writing Analysis	1	1	1	N/A	3
Semantics	3	2	2	N/A	7
Pragmatics	3	2	2	N/A	7
Grammatical Categories	3	2	2	2	9
Dialects	2	1	2	2	7
Onomastics	2	2	2	N/A	6
Languages of the World	2	1	2	N/A	5
SUM	20	14	16	4	54

In addition, general aspects like language, formatting, structure, etc., are graded on a 20-point scale, making the sum of points for the paper 74. Additional 26 points can be received by turning in all drafts on time (4 x 5 = 20 points) and participating in the peer review sessions (2 x 3 = 6 points). The total sum of points is thus 100 (see figure 2). To pass the course, the students must also complete a multiple-choice Moodle test of linguistic terminology graded pass-fail.

<b>drafts</b>		<b>peer review</b>		<b>final paper</b>		
4x5	+	2x3	+	54+20	=	<b>100</b>
20		6		74		

Figure 2. The division of coursework points.

### 3 DISCUSSION

Although we have until now used linguistic autobiography only in a university context, we have argued that the same task could already be used in secondary (and even primary) education (see [8], [9], [10]): guidelines given to younger students could be modified to make understanding and fulfilling the tasks more manageable. Also, it is important to find age-appropriate resources: while first-year undergraduates are expected to use university-level textbooks and research articles, it might also be acceptable if elementary school students used Wikipedia articles for the same task. To make the resources available to a broader public, we have, for example, started a MediaWiki-based wiki environment (<https://wiki.ilonatragel.ut.ee/w/>), where course materials and additional resources are gathered and systemized in a way to make them easily accessible.

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

This semester (fall 2022), we are using the linguistic autobiography coursework for the fourth year in a row. We have read dozens of diverse, engaging, and creative papers during these years and witnessed the rapid development of our students' skills and proficiency in both disciplinary literacy and academic writing. We argue that such coursework - combining textbooks and research papers with personal experience and academic guidelines with creativity - inspires, develops, and empowers students. In addition, it helps them place their higher education in a broader context, become more confident in seeing, understanding, and analyzing their own empirical experiences and expressing those insights clearly and conventionally in the academic context.

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