

THE POTENTIAL OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE EXAMPLE OF LINGUISTICS¹

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Abstract

In this paper we are discussing the benefits of experiential learning in humanities and natural sciences. For the past four years, we have integrated experiential learning into our undergraduate course 'Introduction to Linguistics' by making the students write their linguistic autobiography as the coursework. Through scaffolding, process writing and combination of assistant and peer feedback, we guide the students to reflect on the language-related experiences they have subconsciously accumulated throughout their lives and connect them to the theory they learn in lectures and course reading materials.

We argue that this type of experiential learning helps the students to acquire the theoretical material in a more natural and thorough way. As the course feedback shows, the majority of our student body of 200-250 first year undergraduates acknowledges and values the structure and outcomes of this course. We hope this paper serves as inspiration to other educators on how experiential learning can be incorporated into theoretical courses.

Keywords: Experiential learning, linguistics, process writing, peer feedback.

1 INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has been defined as conceptualizing "active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment" [1]. In educational context, the "outer world of the environment" means the topics and materials covered in a class, whereas "the inner world of the person" is constituted by the learner's memories, emotions, and experiences.

Experiential learning is by no means a new concept. David Boud and his colleagues have been advocating for this approach since 1980s with seminal works like *Using Experience for Learning* (1993) [2] and *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (1985) [3]. Despite their efforts, the experiential learning philosophy is still far from being widespread and universally acknowledged, especially in higher education, and is rather seen as a fun supplement in primary and secondary education (e.g., [1]) or in the organizational culture (e.g., [4]). In this paper, we shed light on the largely untapped potential of using experiential learning in higher education. By introducing linguistic autobiography, our coursework for 'Introduction to Linguistics', we wish to exemplify how this method can be relevant and useful in teaching theoretical courses, especially in humanities and natural sciences.

We have previously shown the benefits of our coursework in development of disciplinary literature [5] and key competencies [6], in the following article we present this concept in the framework of experiential learning and show how using one's personal experiences helps in acquiring theoretical material.

2 METHODOLOGY

'Introduction to Linguistics' (3 ECTS) is the introductory course of Linguistics at the University of Tartu. It is compulsory for approximately 250 first year undergraduates from different departments (foreign languages and literature, linguistics, literature, educational sciences). The course takes place in the fall semester and lasts the whole semester (15 weeks). In the weekly lectures, the main topics of modern Linguistics are covered:

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1. Psycholinguistics and the languages of the world (subtopics: language acquisition and learning, first words and utterances, linguistic environment and first experiences with foreign languages, multilingualism, areal and genealogical classification of languages, language endangerment);
2. Semantics and pragmatics (subtopics: homonymy, polysemy, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, meaning change, categorization, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, adjacency pairs, linguistic landscape);
3. Language typology (subtopics: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, morphosyntax, spoken language influence on written language, comparing languages grammatical categories of languages);
4. Sociolinguistics and onomastics (subtopics: language variation, dialects and sociolects, working with informants, structure and etymology of names).

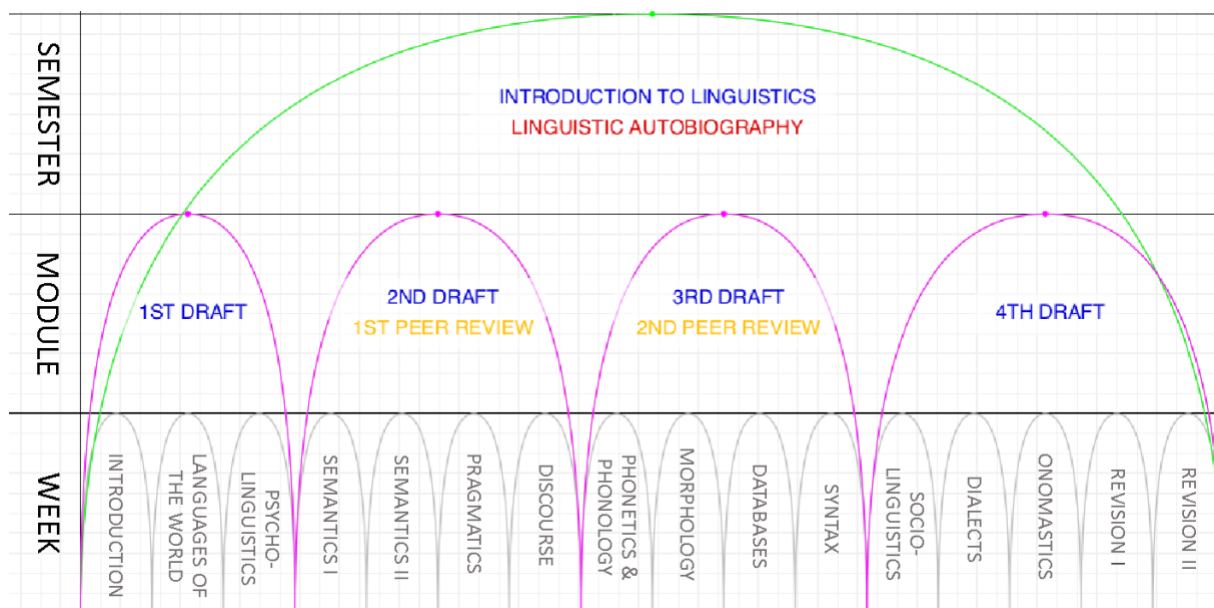


Figure 1. Outline of the course 'Introduction to Linguistics' as a learning arch. Created in LearningArches by Kaospilot. [6]

The coursework of 'Introduction to Linguistics' is writing a linguistic autobiography. This means that the students must recall their own language-related experiences (e.g., acquiring their first language(s), learning to write, learning foreign languages) and describe them in an academic text by naming and explaining all phenomena with linguistic terms and concepts and backing their claims with academic sources wherever applicable. The aforementioned topics are broken down into concrete prompts, all of which the students must cover in their work:

1. Psycholinguistics and languages of the world
 - a. acquiring your first language(s)
 - b. your contacts with foreign languages (including learning), describing those languages from a genetic, areal and sociolinguistic perspective
2. Semantics and pragmatics
 - a. either
 - i. an analysis of a polysemous word of your choice
 - ii. an experiment of categorization of a referent of your choice

- b. either
 - i. linguistic analysis of public signs from your surroundings
 - ii. analysis of adjacency pairs in conversations with your friends or family
- 3. Language typology
 - a. a phonetic analysis and IPA transcription of your first words
 - b. influence of spoken language on written language in your first writing and/or in your online conversations
 - c. comparing the grammatical categories of your native language and some other language(s) you have learned
- 4. Sociolinguistics and onomastics
 - a. analysis of the dialectal background of your parents and grandparents
 - b. structural and etymological analysis of the names of your family, home area or pets

For each topic, the students receive a separate task with Socratic-style questions meant to function as scaffolding (see Example 1). These questions guide them in finding the connections between their relevant experiences and the concepts that help to explain them. A list of relevant linguistic terms (see Example 2) and academic sources is also provided. In each topic, at least two terms and two sources must be used.

Example 1. Guidelines for the topic 'Influence of spoken language on written language'

Recall and/or ask your parents, which traits of spoken language were present in your first written words or phrases (e.g., when you learned to write in school or kindergarten). Which traits of spoken language were there in your dictations / spelling bees. If possible, add photos of your writings to the appendixes and refer to them in the relevant place (e.g., "See Appendix 5").

Which traits of spoken language are currently present in your online chats? Describe and explain them from the phonetic / phonological perspective. Look for the pronunciation of these words in the Phonetic Corpus of Estonian Spontaneous Speech and analyze, if and how it has influenced the way you write these words of expressions. Avoid judgement, because what is called a mistake at school is actually a natural phenomenon, which can be scientifically explained with the influence of spoken language on written language.

Those whose first language is not Estonian can describe their difficulties of learning Estonian from a phonetic and phonological perspective.

Example 2. List of terms for the same topic

phonetics, phonology, auditory phonetics, phoneme, allophone, place of articulation, manner of articulation, categorical perception, vowel, consonant, monophthong, diphthong, coarticulation, assimilation, palatalization, reduction, prosody, stress, primary stress, tone, primary tone, intonation, quantity, variation

The idea of linguistic autobiography is to help the students relate the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired from the lectures and reading materials to empirical knowledge about language that they all subconsciously carry. As Boud, Cohen and Walker [2] have pointed out, experience does not automatically turn into learning, but rather must be translated into learning through reflection. This reflection is what the linguistic autobiography tries to stimulate. By connecting "course concepts to students' personal experiences or previously existing knowledge" [7], we wish to show the students how this knowledge relates to their own life, and, through that, make the learning process more accessible and intuitive (cf. [1]).

There is obviously always the possibility that there are students who cannot or do not wish to write about their own life. Naturally, alternatives must be provided for them, in order for no one to feel left out. We have found different solutions to that, for example, in the psycholinguistics topic, the students can write about an other child (a sibling, a cousin, a niece or nephew, their own child, child of a friend etc.) or use the CHILDES corpus where recordings of child language have been collected; in the sociolinguistics topic they can also use a corpus or analyse the dialect of a celebrity. However, in the four years that we have used the linguistic autobiography task, we have had virtually no problems with students refusing to open up about their linguistic experiences, neither to the instructors nor to the peers in their writing group. On the contrary, most students find it interesting and valuable to work with their own experiences like that. It is also explained thoroughly in the beginning of the course, why this work is undertaken and who exactly has access to these papers. Nevertheless, it is, of course, necessary to be flexible and open to possible accommodations when using experiential learning.

Since 'Introduction to Linguistics' is a freshman course, the linguistic autobiography is for most students their first academic text. To facilitate the writing of such a long paper, we use the process writing approach [8]: the paper is written in four drafts (see Figure 1), with instructor feedback after the 1st and the 4th draft and peer feedback in smaller writing groups after the 2nd and the 3rd draft (see e.g., [9] and [10] for benefits of peer review). The final paper should be 1800-2000 ($\pm 10\%$) words in length, though a student does not lose points for passing the upper limit when their whole text is relevant and covered with academic sources.

The final paper is assessed by instructors according to a point matrix. A maximum of 100 points can be received: 74 points for the paper itself, 20 points for handing in all drafts in time and 6 points for participating in the writing group (see [5] for a more detailed explanation on grading).

3 CONCLUSIONS

In the conclusion of their linguistic autobiography, we ask the students to point out what they found most interesting or surprising while working on this paper. The opinions we see most often are: my language acquisition, the history and structure of the names in my family or home area, the sociolinguistic background of my ancestors. The shared part in all these is *my* - the students were most interested in the things they found out about themselves. This goes to show the impact of experiential learning. Students feel more attached to topics that they can relate to their own life and thus make a bigger effort to understand them. So it should be our role as educators to help them create those associations. The more we can connect the theoretical knowledge with the actual experiences of the students, the more of this theoretical knowledge will be acquired in the courses.

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