

**Project Title** Co-creating a transformative Language Acquisition curriculum

**Aim of the project**

My project explores the co-creation, with students, of a transformative curriculum framework for a Language Acquisition module in the BA (Applied Languages) Honours programme at Nelson Mandela University. Language Acquisition in this module is framed within global north understandings of how both first and second languages are learnt (Selinker, 1972). The argument is that these are global processes that occur in similar ways. The implications for teaching and learning are locally contextualised but are still within these global north understandings. In the module students are introduced to 'seminal' theories of first and second language acquisition. These theories are of course contested by global scholars but these contestations are mostly within the paradigms of western scholarship. In the Language Acquisition module students seek to validate western theories through interrogation of the South African contexts. Assessment draws on both summative (exam) and formative (assignment and presentation) approaches. The assessments are thus also framed within western norms of assessment. Students are successful if they reproduce the theories in the assessments. However, there is application to local contexts in assessments. The students do a final assignment but these are framed within the theories. Two lecturers develop and deliver the material within a pedagogical approach of lecture style seminars. We advocate multilingualism but our English teaching in this module promotes its hegemony. Thus, this project examines what counts as valid knowledge for a Language Acquisition module in an African setting and how light could be shone on this knowledge and it be legitimated.

Language Acquisition theories are the foundational principles on which our discipline of Linguistics is based. The language teaching methodologies we employ and advocate for teachers speak to these theories. The aim was to seek out the epistemologies of the impact of African contexts on first and second language acquisition processes. The project emerges from national imperatives to transform curricula that speak to local realities in addition to global epistemologies. It also emerges from experiences in the module that have shown students find the theories diffuse and alienating to their lived experiences of acquiring a language/s. Our institution has been deeply engaged with discussions of transformation,

questions of decoloniality and Africanisation and what this means for us. Mandela University is drawing on ways of being, ways of doing, ways of thinking and ways of knowing to create a framework for transformed curricula across the university. I hope to add to these deliberations with a deep interrogation of a framework for one module.

To achieve the above, I envisaged a curriculum framework for the Language Acquisition module that is co-created with students and one that engages deeply with the Language Acquisition module philosophies and pedagogies of teaching and learning; assessments; choices made for outcomes; selection of theoretical framings (positioning of localised vs western learning and teaching of language); student access and success; student lived realities (student ways of being including how they learnt language and home discourses); student voice in the curriculum; student agency (movement from regurgitating theories to critical engagement and knowledge production); academic identity (as sole knowers in the Linguistics discipline) and hegemony of English in the module.

### **Methods**

It would be easy to just erase the content and substitute it with scholarship on how multilingual societies learn languages as much have been written about this. However, teacher-student voice and agency in interrogation of localised subjugated realities would be lost if this is done. A process was thus embarked upon where the experiences and realities of our linguistic context were reflected upon and embedded into a re-imagined curriculum. This would form part of a dynamic iterative module from which new thinking would emerge. Ten Honours in Applied Language Studies students at the Nelson Mandela University were the participants in the initial part of this study. This study will be a longitudinal one that will involve interviews with two lecturers, Honours students in successive years and study of language acquisition among children and university students. This report only focuses on the first part of the project, i.e student reflections on their language learning and the module content in an attempt to begin a dynamic and iterative process of co-creation of the curriculum.

Decolonisation of the curriculum implies a bottom up process driven approach drawing on the experiences of all. The teacher is not the sole knower. Firstly, through the continuous co-

creation of the module, student and staff are discovering what it means to be a human learning language in Africa (in the specific context of a university located in an urban Eastern Cape city). Secondly, they are interrogating and recognising their experiences of subjugation as well as how their own teaching and learning contributes to the hegemonic hierarchies. Thirdly, they are aiding in consistently developing a grammar or language for speaking about their linguistic realities. Lastly, they are interrogating how power relations of race, gender and class are embedded in monolingual paradigms; what it means to be human as isiXhosa, English and/or Afrikaans mother tongue speakers; how indigenous languages are valued and legitimised and how the resources of these languages can be drawn on enhance their language acquisition.

The methodology used in the project is based on a qualitative approach. In depth interrogation of the theories and module content by students and the naturalistic experiences of ten Honours students have been the methodological framing of the project. Student reflective narratives (written and spoken) on their language learning experiences and the SLA theories form the data collection tools of this co-created module.

### **Outcomes**

The co-created curriculum framework outcomes were as follows: Seven weekly two hour-Honours seminars that involved student-staff voice were held in April and May 2019. The first seminar introduced students to the project, obtained their consent, discussed theories of co-creation and communities of practice. Firstly, the lecturer designed the pre-seminars reflective tasks and reading journal prompts for these seminars. The pre-seminar reflections were deliberate in that they allowed the students to start from the “I” before being presented with the theory. In their reflections students compared their language acquisition experiences to those of the theories and studies. The theory or seminar content may have influenced or distracted from their own experiences so they were asked to reflect before a seminar. Secondly, students were given articles for an upcoming seminar with reading prompts. These prompts asked them to freewrite on what resonated with them or troubled them in the article. When the seminar actually occurred, students firstly shared their pre-seminar reflections and their journal prompts. The seminar then focused on the theories (SLA seminar theories and multilingualism). They then handed their reflections and reading journal

prompts in and the lecturer coded the themes emerging from the reflections and reading journal prompts. These themes then formed part of the next seminar's discussion and so became infused with the seminal theories. The reflections and prompts were also part of formal assessments in a portfolio and exams. Two focus group sessions with students and two lecturers would also be held at the end of the module.

The research question for the project was as follows: What are the components of a transformative Language Acquisition Honours module?

The following specific outcomes have emerged thus far:

Student linguistic lived realities (student ways of being including how they learnt language and home discourses):

The ten Honours students were mostly from the Eastern Cape. Two were from outside the Province but were living and working in Port Elizabeth. Multilingualism and diversity were the norms among the students. Most students were bi- and multilinguals. Students had either learnt or were learning many new languages. English was dominant among students. Students had positive regard for English as lingua franca. Families felt proud at the taking on of English. Students initially learnt their mother tongues and English became their dominant language when they started school. Most students felt that they mixed or translanguaged in informal situations. They were more conscious of their language use when in formal academic settings. The focus in informal situations was on meaning making but they felt embarrassed in formal settings when they made mistakes. They did not see themselves as fossilising in informal settings but because they were under surveillance in formal settings, they were conscious of mistakes. Students also noticed that their younger family members were translanguaging. For example: "mina ngi brave." They used English and mother tongue simultaneously when speaking to family members. Most students did not see their languages as separate especially English and their mother tongues. Four were English mother tongue speakers and they saw their additional languages as very separate from their mother tongue of English. This shows that the linguistic situation was complex and diverse.

Students thought that African language acquisition of additional languages was often an unconscious endeavour. They attributed this to our multilingual society and contrasted this with the global north – which they understood to be mostly monolingual. While families had encouraged students to learn via the medium of English and improve their proficiencies in it,

they expressed concern when they realised that with this had come with a loss of proficiency in mother tongue. One student's parent had established an isiXhosa free zone at home. Students were making conscious efforts to re-acquire their mother tongues by speaking it at home and in social spaces. Students experienced their language learning as non-linear in contrast to linear SLA language acquisition approaches. They could not see clear boundaries between their spoken languages as they were 'mixed' there were no boundaries. They did reflect that even if they started life off with one language spoken to them primarily, the communities they lived in and their extended families spoke more than one language. English mother tongue speakers saw themselves as monolingual and most did not attempt to learn another language. The reasons for these were not interrogated but it is assumed it is because of the status English occupies.

#### Student voice in the curriculum

Students were given voice in the curriculum through their reading journal reflections and inclusion of their reflections in the content of the curriculum and assessment practices. Students shared their reflections of language learning and the theories verbally and I made summaries of these and disseminated them to all students. Summative and formative assessments also drew on their reflections. Students not only tried to make sense of the main points of the readings but read against the text in terms of their own language learnings. For example, students would reflect on whether or not the SLA 'seminal' readings made sense to them in terms of readability or if the dense academic language excluded them. They also reflected if the theories resonated with their language learning experiences as individuals who lived in the Eastern Cape and specifically Port Elizabeth. One student for example, was confused about whether or not the notion of interlanguage implied that if one learnt more than one language, one thus had a number of interlanguages. This project has started exploring an African centered language acquisition curriculum, one which is co-created with students to bear testimony to what it means to learn a language in Africa and in our local Eastern Cape context. This report was focused on student lived realities (student ways of being including how they learn language and home discourses) and student voice in the curriculum. The project will in its next phase engage deeply with the themes of Language Acquisition module philosophies and pedagogies of teaching and learning; assessments; choices made for outcomes; selection of theoretical framings (positioning of localised vs

western learning and teaching of language); student access and success; student agency (movement from regurgitating theories to critical engagement and knowledge production); academic identity (as sole knowers in the Linguistics discipline) and hegemony of English in the module. The project will also develop into a longitudinal research treatise project around language acquisition of children and language use of students. The research could be conducted by Honours and Masters students. Lecturers would be interviewed for their views on the project themes as outline above. Much data has already emerged but the brevity of this report means that I cannot do justice to all the data. In a multilingual environment such as South Africa and Africa, languages operate very differently and the acquisition does not occur as per the seminal western canon. We need to continue troubling the theories in an African multilingual context given language acquisition's monoglossic lens of separate language systems. Language transfer has often been seen as an impediment in the acquisition of an additional language as per the canon but multilingualism speaks back to this. The process of language learning for most Honours students involved acquiring mother tongue in early years; losing most of mother tongue and gaining English; reclaiming and reacquiring mother tongue while maintaining English and learning of more languages. The process is non-linear and dynamically African.

### **References**

Lave and Wenger

Selinker, L. 1976. Interlanguage. Germany: Julius Groot Verlag.