

Combining subject-specific and subject-independent competencies in teaching Linguistics

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Abstract

In recent decades, the concept of key competencies has become increasingly relevant in education, prompting universities to revise their curricula to make more room for subject-independent skills and knowledge. We argue that the best way to incorporate key competencies into the curriculum is teaching them through different subjects. In favour of this notion we present the case study of our course 'Introduction to Linguistics' at the University of Tartu (Estonia), which successfully combines subject-specific and subject-independent knowledge through a coursework which let the students write their own linguistic autobiography, combining their own unique experience with an academic framework. In the process, the students mastered the linguistic concepts covered in lectures, while also practicing academic writing and application of academic methods.

Keywords: *Key competencies; linguistics; process writing; peer feedback.*

1. Introduction

One of the main challenges of modern education is incorporating into curricula the so-called ‘key competencies’ (Erstad & Voogt, 2018), which the European Commission framework document defines as “knowledge, skills and competencies that can be transferred to real-life situations” (EC EECEA, Eurydice 2012). Those universal key competencies are crucial for the students to successfully and sustainably cope in the modern age of rapid change and abundant information (EC EECEA, Eurydice 2012).

However, the increased focus on key competencies should not come with the price of neglecting subject-specific knowledge, which still is the core of university education (Young, 2008). One way to find balance between the universal and the specific is teaching subject-independent knowledge (i.e. key competencies) through subject-specific knowledge (EC EECEA, Eurydice 2012). That is what our course ‘Introduction to Linguistics’ aims to achieve.

2. Course Organization

The course ‘Introduction to Linguistics’ at the University of Tartu is a 3 ECTS introductory course covering the main branches, concepts and functions of linguistics. The course is mandatory in the 1st semester for undergraduate students of Linguistics, Literature, Semiotics, Foreign Languages and Literature and Educational Sciences. All in all, approximately 200-250 students take the course every year. Given the nature the student body (the wide spectrum of their majors and the fact that it’s one of the first courses that they’re taking at the university), we have set two aims for the course:

1. The subject-specific aim: To give the students a broad overview of modern linguistics that would later help them in their specific field of study.
2. The subject-independent aim: To introduce the students to academic writing, working with academic sources and analysing data with academic means.

With the combination of these two aims in mind, we have developed the coursework of this subject: each student writes their own linguistic autobiography, a 1800-2200 word paper where they describe and analyse their own language-related experiences according to a framework of materials and terminology covered in the lectures. Influenced by student-centred-learning (SCL) principles (Lee & Hannafin, 2016), the linguistic autobiography assignment seeks to turn learning more personal, to value each student’s unique experiences and to encourage them to build on those experiences to create an original and personal paper.

The subject-specific aim of this coursework is in accordance with the revised Bloom taxonomy which ranks *creating* as the highest level of cognitive learning (Forehand, 2005): in order to create the original body of text that is the linguistic autobiography, they first have

to pass the lower steps of the pyramid, i.e. master the course material fully so that they can use and integrate it freely in their own text. This idea also follows the constructionist theory of learning, which emphasises the importance of students actively producing and “constructing” something new upon the knowledge gained in classes (Lee & Hannafin, 2016).

The subject-independent aim of this coursework is inspired by the disciplinary literacy concept coined by Elizabeth Birr Moje (2011). Disciplinary literacy encompasses reading, understanding, synthesising and creating academic texts of one’s field of study. Moje argues that it’s important for the students to understand where the knowledge presented in the class comes from and how it has been acquired in order to learn to produce these kinds of texts themselves (Moje, 2011). That includes “teaching young people how to access, interpret, challenge, and reconstruct the texts of the disciplines” (Moje, 2011). Through the coursework we guide and encourage the students to work with different academic sources to interpret and compare the data and observances from their own life, thus validating and sometimes also criticising the sources.

In order to walk the students through this process, they receive a task with guiding questions, a list of up-to-date relevant sources and a list of linguistic terms (see an example below) for each subtopic that they have to write about. In each subtopic the students must use at least two academic sources and at least two terms which have to have an explanation (in footnotes) based on the textbook or other relevant source.

The text is divided into four sections, following the basic topics in linguistics and covered in lectures (see Figure 1):

1. Psycholinguistics and the languages of the world (keywords: *language acquisition and learning, first words, language environment and contact, mono- and bilingualism, areal and genealogical classification of languages, language endangerment*).
2. Semantics and pragmatics (keywords: *the nature and the shift of meaning, a linguistic analysis of a text or conversation*)
3. Language typology (keywords: *phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, describing a language from morphosyntactic aspects, phonetic analysis of written language, comparing languages through grammatical categories*)
4. Sociolinguistics and Onomastics (keywords: *language variation, dialects, working with informants, structure and etymology of names*)

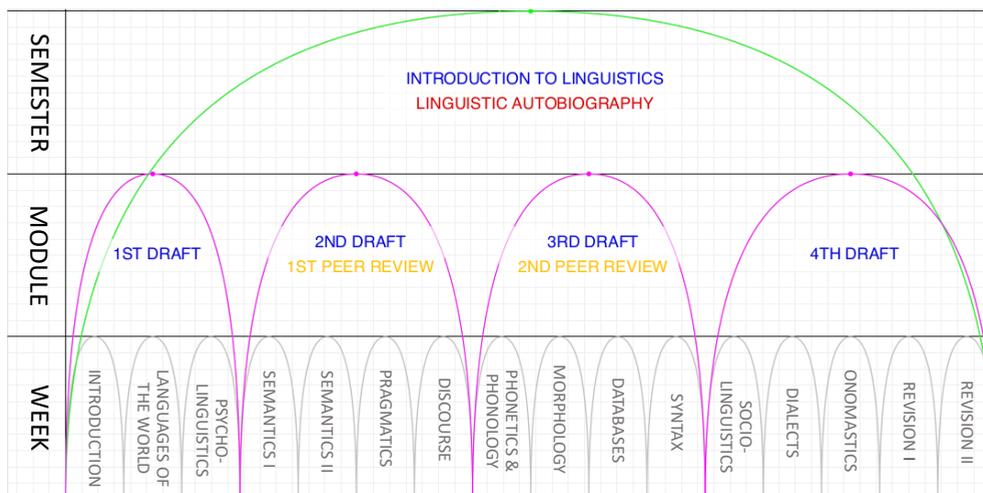


Figure 1. Course outline as a learning arch. Created in LearningArches by Kaospilot

In order to facilitate the process of learning, we use process writing, where students submit their drafts four times, adding one part each time according to the topics listed above and also resubmitting their previous text with corrections each time. After submitting each draft, the students receive feedback: in the 1st and 4th stage from their instructor, in the 2nd and 3rd stage from their peers in 3-5 member writing groups (about the benefits of process writing and peer-review see Guilford, 2001; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Leijen, 2016). After receiving feedback on the 4th draft, the students make their last amendments and submit the final version of the work for assessment.

Example 1. The guidelines given to the students for the 1st draft’s 1st subtopic

Can you ask your parents which were your first words? Can you explain, why these particular words? When did they appear? What about longer utterances? Give concrete examples!

[...]¹

In which kind of a linguistic environment (i.e. monolingual, bilingual) have you acquired your first language(s)? Do you consider yourself bilingual? Explain! Do you remember or can you find out what was your first contact with a foreign language? Describe it!

¹ The opportunity to write about siblings, younger relatives or other acquaintances was also in the task in case the student doesn't have any recollection or materials from their childhood. In case student prefers not to write on his/her own experiences, use of CHILDES corpus (<https://childes.talkbank.org/>) was permitted instead.

As can be seen from the example, the tasks were written in an easy and accessible language, using the Socratic method inspired questions to prompt students to contemplate, re-evaluate, and generalise their life experiences and associate and compare them with theories that they learned about in the lectures and the sources provided to them. The task was also accompanied by 14 possible sources from textbooks to research articles (e.g. Ambridge *et al.*, 2013) and 16 terms (e.g. *bubbling*, *overgeneralisation*, *reference*, *reduplication*). All of this functions as conceptual scaffolds, meant to guide students in “linking and organizing knowledge related to a topic” (Lee & Hannafin, 2016).

Example 2. The respective section from a student’s work

From the morphological traits that characterise child language (Tragel 2020), reduplication (e.g. auh-auh ‘woof-woof’, adaa-adaa ‘bye-bye’) was present in my speech, and from the phonological traits (Garmann et al. 2020) reduction (e.g. at ‘auto’ (Estonian for ‘car’)).

As can be seen from this excerpt, the student has described her childhood language use referring to the lectures (Tragel 2020) and to an academic paper (Garmann et al. 2020), proving that they understand the theory and can apply it to real life by relating it with empirical data from their own experience.

3. Evaluation and Outcomes

The final submitted papers will be assessed by instructors following a standardised point matrix that has been developed and updated throughout the three years that the linguistic autobiography task has been used. There are separate categories for every subchapter, where the content, the sources, the terms and (where applicable) the examples are graded on a scale varying from 4-point to 1-point (depending on the size and importance of this particular part in relation to the whole text). In addition to the topic-centred categories, there are also general categories that evaluate the work as a whole with regard to language, formatting, structure etc. All in all, it is possible to receive 74 points for the paper, with 19 points for general categories and 55 points for topics. In order to motivate students to work consistently throughout the semester and submit their drafts on time, they receive 5 points for each draft published before on time (losing one point for each day of delay) and 3 points for both of the peer review seminars where they give both oral and written feedback. The total amount of points is thus $74 + 4 \times 5 + 2 \times 3 = 100$.

For meaningful learning purposes, we value the feedback by students at the end of the course about how difficult and how interesting the course was for them. The majority of students admitted that the course was relatively difficult. With SCL it was to be expected, because students were required to participate actively throughout the whole course instead of just

attending the lectures (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). The main hardships mentioned by students were time management, proper academic writing and working with academic papers. However, it's noteworthy that a similar percentage of students claimed the course to be interesting for them, thus meaning that the high percentage of students considering the course to be difficult may not be a problem, but rather sign that the course was challenging but rewarding. The written feedback reveals that students realise and value both of the two main aspects of the course: the subject-specific as well as subject-independent.

Example 3. Some excerpts from this feedback (answers to the question “What do you value the most from everything you learned in this course?”):

The ability to associate theory and practice.

This course made me think of language from such a different perspective than I ever could have imagined. I liked that even when I'm not going to become a philologist or linguist, it broadened my horizons and made me realise things from a different perspective.

Writing my own linguistic autobiography taught me to describe my own experiences and observances with academic methods.

4. Summary

Thus it can be said that the linguistic autobiography coursework was a success. It was naturally challenging for many students, given how most of them had little to none previous experience with academic writing and working with academic sources. However, this proves all the more the importance of this course for their academic path – which many students themselves also embraced in their feedback. We are also introducing the format of linguistic autobiography to high school students through a series of articles in a local popular science magazine Oma Keel (Teiva & Tragel, 2021, 2022). In order to make the study resources available to a wider public (and also enable the students to access them after the course ends) we have created a MediaWiki-based linguistics wiki environment that can be accessed at wiki.ilonatragel.ut.ee (in Estonian only).

In a wider sense, our course proves that it is in fact possible to successfully unite subject-specific and subject-independent learning, educating the students on their chosen field of study while also developing their key competencies. It's not only the students that gain from this sort of compound teaching, but also universities: in a world where universities tend more and more towards cost-effectiveness, it is even more crucial to maximise the benefit of every course.

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