

It's time to rethink how foreign languages are taught at universities

By [Fiona Home](#)

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Many people underestimate the difficulty involved in learning a language. This is because language acquisition goes beyond comprehension. It also involves socialisation and emotion. The high level of personal engagement this requires is even more challenging at South African universities, where students are struggling to meet the demands of academic life.



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This situation has compelled many educators such as myself, teaching in the field of French and Francophone studies at Witwatersrand University, to reflect on our teaching practice.

The broad aim of language education is to communicate independently in a foreign language. This is based on the premise that language skills learned in classrooms are easily transferable to real-life situations, and that students will be proficient at the end of a language programme. But this isn't the case and results almost always fall short of this expectation.

This, and the current [learning crisis](#) in tertiary education, means that an urgent conversation on the process of learning is necessary. More attention should be paid to learner subjectivity and experience – an important component of language acquisition.

A growing body of [research](#) underscores the importance of a shift in thinking. It's clear that a purely cognitive approach to learning, even if learner-centered and communicative, won't guarantee student engagement. More emphasis on the experience of learning a language is required in teaching.

Teaching and learning paradox

I've never met a person who has studied French – or any other foreign language for that matter – who doesn't feel apologetic, inadequate or even guilty for their language skills. People often put their difficulties in communicating down to not being "good at languages" or "not applying themselves" enough. But in reality, there are a number of factors that hinder acquisition. These have little to do with students' aptitudes, limitations and levels of motivation.

Learning a foreign language in an institutional context comes with structural constraints. These include limited contact time and a lack of socialisation into the language through an existing community that speaks the target language.

One way to counter these obstacles is recreating communicative situations in classrooms such as structured dialogues between learners. But these approaches are often too artificial and ritualised – teachers and learners are trapped in their respective roles and the spontaneity that characterises real-life communication remains elusive. Often, knowledge about the language doesn't transfer to knowledge about how to use the language.

The idea of the “native speaker” as a model of proficiency still [dominates](#) language education, even though it's unrealistic and impossible to define. Language errors are often stigmatised instead of being viewed as a natural and meaningful part of building communicative skills.

Teachers who banish the students' first language from the classroom disempower learners who are already vulnerable expressing themselves in the language they're studying. All of these factors contribute to a negative learning experience and linguistic insecurity, which in turn lead to poor results.

Changing student culture

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that students at South African universities are already battling with significant challenges. Financial pressures due to structural inequalities, academic unpreparedness and increasingly, mental health disorders have become a common feature of university life. On the whole, undergraduate students seem to lack the learning strategies and emotional resilience required to successfully complete academic courses.

Student culture is also changing. The democratisation of learning spaces has come under the spotlight again and was intensified by the student-driven movement of [decolonisation](#). Students are laying a claim to their own histories and identities which have been historically marginalised. As a result, learner subjectivity and experience are being afforded more importance in teaching and learning settings at universities. This affective (emotional) dimension of language acquisition is often overlooked in teaching.

The value of learning

In light of this, educators and students should be spending a lot more time talking about why and how they are teaching and learning languages. This would go far in addressing the immediate needs of the students. It would also broaden the scope of teaching beyond its typically results-based, utilitarian focus.

Addressing learning in itself would firstly develop learning strategies and cultivate self-awareness in students who are emotionally and academically ill-equipped to learn independently. It would link the learning process to self-development, which goes beyond linguistic knowledge and know-how.

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