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Language(s) in education

An auto-ethnography of meaningful language moments across a lifetime

In this chapter the complexities and intricacies of the psychology of language in education are explored. The chapter draws primarily on the South African socio-political context to investigate shifting perceptions on language use in educational contexts of high diversity, significant inequality and historical contestations. An auto-ethnographic approach is utilised to trace the manifestations of four psychological constructs, i) emotion, ii) motivation, iii) reinforcement, and iv) problem-solving in language decision-making in relation to education, over a period of five decades (1972–2022). The personal narrative study agitates for the creation of dialogic spaces of constructive debate and negotiation, acceptance of partiality and reciprocal, inclusive participation in language landscapes. The study also positions emotion as an incitement to engagement on matters of language diversity. It elevates motivation, reinforcement and problem-solving as critical tools to create long-term solutions to multiple educational challenges. Moreover, the study echoes the effects of the psychology of language on literacy levels, language-of-instruction preferences, perception-and-science dichotomies and the politicisation of language in education. In essence, the chapter seeks to enhance the pursuit of quality education by acknowledging the integral nature of the psychology of language in education across the developmental lifespan.

Keywords: language, autoethnography, language diversity, narratives

1. Introduction

The psychology of language has been studied for many decades (Clark & Clark, 1977; Harley, 2013; Holtgraves, 2013; Tomasello, 2002). As indicated by Langacker (2002, 1), language "has two basic and closely related functions: a semiological function, allowing thoughts to be symbolized by means of sounds, gestures, or writing, as well as an interactive function, embracing communication, expressiveness, manipulation, and social communion". Although the psychology of language can be found within both these functions, it is often within the

interactive space, where it is most profoundly present. As such, the field of psycholinguistics has seen substantive and consistent growth (Gleitman & Gleitman, 2022; Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2011).

Over the course of several decades, the work of Wolfgang Stadler has reflected the various dimensions of language, language use, language testing and also the role of silence in both formal and informal educational settings (Fuchsbauer et al., 2021; Hinger & Stadler, 2018; Lavric et al., 2008; Stadler, 2015; Stadler & Dreher, 2022; Will et al., 2022). These studies echoed the underpinning psychological processes during language use, e.g. the psychology of language. This included teaching and testing sociopragmatics in the Russian language classroom (Stadler, 2015), extensive work on the linguistics of football (Lavric et al., 2008) and the pragmatics of silence, such as the acts of silence, phases of silence and the silences that accompany actions (Stadler, 2010). Stadler's work depicts these complexities eloquently and it weaves together narratives of language, education, and sociopragmatics in meticulously novel ways. His work has proven to have global relevance in various social contexts.

In the South African context, specifically in relation to education, language has been a highly contested space. It is frequently present in public discourses in terms of privilege, inclusion and exclusion, discussions on quality-of-education, access and historical antecedents of a colonial past. Yet, numerous studies also incline pro-active approaches that seek to contribute to multilingualism, translanguaging and active support for language diversity (Dippenaar et al., 2018; Livingston et al., 2022; Livingstone & Dippenaar, 2022). Nevertheless, debates on language in education often dichotomise the complexities of learning and marginalise attempts to insert nuanced understandings of the dynamics at play.

Yet, it is within this personal, complex space, where the intricacies of language and learning are to be understood most deeply. The psychological processes underpinning learning are simultaneously personal and systemic.

The current study seeks to inform understandings of the psychology of language in education within this personal space. It intentionally seeks a narrative format that ventures to explore personal experiences of language, learning and the consequent psychological dynamics in a context of high language diversity.

2. Method

2.1 Auto-ethnography of language and psychology

The case for auto-ethnographic research has been argued (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021) for reasons of expansion of interpretive spaces, the encouragement of multiple perspectives of phenomena, plurality of voice and agitations against unitary theories in social sciences. Specifically, auto-ethnographic studies invite readers to feel and co-experience moral dilemmas, and "to think with our story, instead of about it" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 735).
This study adopts an auto-ethnographic approach to illuminate some of the dynamics of the psychology of language and learning over a period of five decades (1972–2022) within the South African and also the global context. The study presents eight 'moments' of heightened language awareness over the course of a lifetime. The conceptual departure points of each 'moment' are educational in nature. It purposefully connects the personal to the contextual. In particular, the study exposes vulnerable dimensions of personal experience and learning as it seeks to interrogate singular interpretations of language phenomena.
To facilitate this investigation, the study explores four psychological constructs within the auto-ethnography, e.g. i) emotion, ii) motivation, iii) reinforcement, and iv) problem-solving. For the purpose of the study, emotion is defined as an inner psychological state that is personal, evaluative, fleeting and related to the affective dimension of the human experience Motivation is defined as a driver of the instigation, direction and continuance of human behaviour. Reinforcement is defined as stimuli that strengthen behavioural responses and problem-solving is defined as cognitive processes that direct behaviour to find solutions to internal or external challenges (Colman, 2003; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2021).

2.2 Time and place of study

The auto-ethnography is positioned within a demarcated time period within one lifetime, where some of the first language awareness experiences of the researcher is at approximately four to five years of age; and then continues to most recent experiences at the time of writing of the current chapter. During the period of study, there were substantive shifts in the socio-political landscape in the country. Some of the key moments included the 1976 Soweto uprising in protest

to the introduction of the Afrikaans language in all South African schools, the release of ANC-leader Nelson Mandela in Cape Town in 1990, and the first democratic elections in 1994. In 1996 the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa declared South Africa as a multilingual country. Section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996) specifically granted official language status to 11 languages, namely Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, 245). Geographically, South Africa is situated at the Southern tip of the continent of Africa, which served for centuries as a stopover on the trade routes between Asia and Europe. Indigenous language development and the psychology of language explored in this chapter can be traced within this historical context.

2.3 Auto-ethnographic moments of language awareness

The current study utilises select auto-ethnographic moments of language awareness as narrative pivot points to explore the psychology of language in education within the South African context. The selection of 'moments' were conducted reflexively. After generating a list of moments by asking, "What were some key moments of language awareness over the course of this lifetime?", eight key moments were identified. Subsequently, each moment was considered in terms of the contextual and temporal details of the experience. These moments were then described succinctly in short, textual, raw narratives. All eight of the raw narratives were drafted first. Then, each of the narratives were revised and refined into final descriptions of the moments. This process was conducted over a period of numerous months. All the narratives are from the same person, i.e. by me. All the names of the 'others' in the narratives have been anonymized. Revisions entailed slight changes to sentence structures, punctuation, removal of repetitive text and rephrasing.

The consideration of the chronology of the various auto-ethnographic moments constituted the final phase of the development of the auto-ethnographic moments. During the generative phase, no consideration was given to the chronology of the 'moments'. However, in this final phase the 'moments' were rearranged to portray a broad sequential order. The next section presents the descriptions of the auto-ethnographic moments.

3. Auto-ethnographic moments

3.1 Moment 1 – Miss Weinberg: 1972-1974

Miss Weinberg lived across the landing in the block of flats where we lived as a family when I was a little girl. We were living in a town called Krugersdorp in the former Transvaal province of South Africa. It was the early 1970s. Miss Weinberg was an 'English lady'. Not a 'lady' in any formal sense, but a lady in the way she played a role in my life. Miss Weinberg was living alone and she often invited me over for tea. I was five years old, and we had a baby brother at home. Since my mom was often very busy with him, I regularly slipped across the landing and went over for tea at Miss Weinberg's flat. The two of us would sit on her small veranda, she would pour us cups of tea, and we would be looking at the gardens in the apartment complex. The tea was always lovely and I still remember the clinking sound of the little tea cups as she would stir in our sugar. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with Miss Weinberg.
It was only several years later, that I realized that these short interactions I had as a young child with Miss Weinberg assisted me greatly in acquiring the English language later in my life. English was a language that was inaccessible to me in all the other spaces of my life. We were an Afrikaans speaking family in South Africa, and all our socialising was in Afrikaans, my first language. Miss Weinberg was the only person with whom I was speaking English. These delightful interactions with Miss Weinberg at a young age created pathways into the English-speaking world. This realization came subtly and slowly. For instance, when I entered primary school and we had to indicate English synonyms for Afrikaans words, I would know the answers – even though we had moved by then and Miss Weinberg was only a fond memory of my preschool years.

3.2 Moment 2 – My mother: 1975-1981

The moments of accessing a diversity of language worlds were abundant throughout my childhood. In addition to her mother tongue, my mother could speak Sesotho, an indigenous African language, fluently. She grew up on a farm in the Orange Free State province of South Africa and spoke it throughout her childhood. As a young girl, she had older siblings who were more than a decade older than her, and most of her friends were Sesotho.

Years later, during my childhood in the 1970s and 1980s, we would find ourselves in many public spaces where my mother would suddenly start to speak Sesotho with the people around us. We might have been in a shop, at the post office, at a gas station or at a social gathering. My mother would be speaking to us (her children) in Afrikaans at one moment and in the instance, she would be speaking in Sesotho to someone standing behind or beside us. Even though I could not understand a word they were saying, the ambience of the conversation between her and the other person/s would *always* be warm and affectionate. They would be smiling and laughing, and sometimes I could even notice the conversation turning to me and my siblings. These interactions, without fail, emanated affection. I remember having a warm glowing feeling in those moments. My mother was able to enter a world of shared landscapes, shared knowledges and compassionate histories. My siblings and I wanted to share in those moments. Over the course of time, we learned the basic introductory phrases in Sesotho, even though we never developed full conversational skills. To this day, the greeting "Dumela" (hello) is one of the most beautiful, invitational expressions to me.

3.3 Moment 3 – Psychology and English: 1987-1989

Psychology and English were my undergraduate major subjects. Entering university in 1987, I was so excited about my fields of studies. I loved the various modules and courses in the two subject areas equally. As an adolescent, I had dreamed of becoming a child psychologist, but at school Psychology was not offered as a subject. We did, however, have language courses and I thoroughly enjoyed every single aspect of languages, whether it was poetry, prose, grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking or listening.

Upon enrolling at university, one of the methods I used to finance my academic education was by applying for a bursary to pursue a career in teaching. In order to enhance my chances of actually obtaining the bursary I had to look at the scarce subject areas where teachers were needed. At the time the scarce subjects were predominantly Mathematics and English. I promptly chose English as my other major in addition to Psychology.

When I was nearing the end of my undergraduate studies, I was torn to decide between English and Psychology for my postgraduate studies. I still loved both subjects. My lecturers and professors in both subjects at the rural university where I was studying were absolutely excellent, and they instilled in me an even deeper love for both fields.

3.4 Moment 4 – Presenting clinical case studies: 1992-1993

We were sitting in a master's degree class of Educational Psychology in early 1992. I was now studying at a large, urban university in the capital city of South Africa. As postgraduate students we were all in our first year of master's degree studies. Every Wednesday we would have case discussions where one of us would bring our practical work that we had done in the preceding week, and we would present it to a multidisciplinary team of health professionals, doctors, educational psychologists, occupational therapists, and sometimes also speech therapists. For the panel discussion, we would have to prepare a written report that was sent out to the entire panel a day before and then on the day, we spent approximately an hour to 90 minutes in discussion. The treatment plan for the particular family or child that we were working with in our clinical practical work were developed and discussed in-depth. There was a substantive amount of information that had to be shared in a very limited period of time.

At one of these panel discussions, one of my peers, Marilyn, started to present her case in her first language. She was a Setswana-speaking woman. Similar to what we had been doing every week, Marilyn started speaking at the speed of light, presenting the case, lifting up all the psychometric assessment tests, speaking to the psychometric instruments of the child she had assessed. About four minutes into her case study discussion, Marilyn stopped. She looked up and she started laughing.

“This is how I feel every week when you start discussing your case studies at great speed” she said. “You present your cases in a language that is easy to speak for you, but for me, English and Afrikaans is a third or a fourth language. But when I speak in my own mother tongue, which is Setswana, I can hold up an academic discussion easily".

On that day, Marilyn, illustrated to me the power of language in such a simple and profound way. I will forever remember that feeling of wanting to understand, but not understanding what she was saying as she presented her case – and her case study.

3.5 Moment 5 – Doctoral studies: 1995-1997

I completed my primary school years, my high school years, my undergraduate studies, my postgraduate studies and my doctoral degree in my mother tongue, Afrikaans. This was not something I questioned at the time and it seemed almost without intentional design. It was only many years later when someone asked

me at an academic conference, whether I had completed my doctoral degree in Afrikaans, and I had to think for a moment. I had in actual fact written my thesis in Afrikaans (Eloff, 1997). But at that point in time, much of my academic work was being conducted in English, which was the *lingua franca* of much of the academic world where I was spending my professional life. Looking back, I realized that I unquestioningly participated in a full schooling and university career in a language that was highly accessible to me. My conceptualizations of theoretical constructs, complex processes and all the subject knowledge that I had gained during the course of my years of learning was in my first language. I had rows of dictionaries on my bookshelf, but it was used to find *better words,* when I was writing, rather than the meaning of words.

3.6 Moment 6 – A play school: 1997-2002

I was a stay-at-home mom for the first few years of our children's lives. We had two young boys who were born two years apart. When they were approximately five and three years old, I started to look for a little play school where they could spend time during some of the mornings in the week, playing with friends their ages. It was the late 1990s. Our prerequisites for the play school were that it should be in close proximity to our house, be welcoming, have great teachers and focus on informal play.

There were several options in the vicinity. The playschool I found most appealing was just down the street from where we were living in Pretoria. It was the only playschool that met all the requirements that we had considered as their parents. I specifically did not want them to have too much structured learning activities at these ages. I just wanted them to have hours of free play with friends and the ability to explore the world and learning in tactile ways. The language of instruction at this playschool however was English, which was not the mother tongue of our own children. When considering playschools at first, I did not really think about language-of-instruction, since in our minds, the emphasis would be on play and informal learning. There was another preschool with Afrikaans as language of instruction, but their entire day was designed for structured learning with very little time for free play. This presented us with the difficult situation of having to choose a preschool (e.g. 'playschool') where our children would be able to be instructed in their mother tongue, but where there would be lots of structured activities at the ages of three and five. On the other hand, we could put them in a preschool with a language-of-instruction that would be different from their mother tongue, but they could engage in playful learning. As an

educational psychologist, I was hesitant to introduce too much structured play and formal learning this early for them. At the English playschool they would have the opportunity to play almost all the time. In the end, we chose to put them in the preschool with English as a language-of-instruction. When I would fetch them at around 12 o'clock midday, they would be all dirty and full of mud and beaming with smiles of happiness.

3.7 Moment 7 – The German-speaking world: 2017-present

I was sitting in a reception area of the Faculty of Education at the University of Innsbruck, Innrain campus, waiting for my first appointment. The year prior (2016), I was invited by the Dean of the Faculty at the time to visit the University during my sabbatical year that was upcoming.
People were coming up and down the corridor, speaking to one another in German. The secretary was arriving and she was speaking to me in partial German and partial English. We could only understand each other a little bit, despite our efforts on both sides. I had a profound sense of excitement about the possibilities of entering a whole language world which was up to that point, inaccessible to me through conventional linguistic pathways. What can be learned? I sensed in that moment, that there may potentially be a journey ahead of mutual learning and understanding.

3.8 Moment 8 – Dialogue Forums: 2016 onwards

I was in Mexico City at an international dialogue forum of the UNESCO Teacher Task Force. I was about to present the initiatives of the African Deans of Education Forum, but I had to wait a few minutes for the translators for the new session to settle into their translation booths so that those who were attending this session would be able to follow the presentation in English. The translations were available in Spanish and French, and I was presenting in English.
I had been advised to speak fairly slowly. As I was presenting, I could note the effect of the slight time delay in the translations. This was to be expected, because the translators were only able to translate what I was saying. They did not have access to my presentation beforehand, and I was not reading from a script, so they were translating as I was speaking. Approximately half of the audience was wearing headphones. I could see the reactions to what I was saying to the members of the audience who were not wearing headphones and assumed to

be able to understand English. Every time that I said something that led to a reaction in the audience, there would be two moments of reaction in the audience. First from the 'English-speaking', non-headphone wearing audience members, and then another reaction slightly afterwards in those who were wearing headphones.
Reversely at the same dialogue forum, I experienced it personally when I was attending sessions, where the speakers would be either Spanish-speaking, or French-speaking. In these instances, the translators were translating into English for those of us who were not speaking Spanish or French and we would be the ones wearing headphones.
What I recall about this particular dialogue forum (and many other subsequent dialogue forums) is the fact that even though the languages that were being spoken by the presenters differed so much, the challenges that were being experienced in teacher education were remarkably similar. In my mind, the similarities were more profound than the differences. The presenters were sharing thoughts about the status of the teaching profession, the challenges of keeping and attracting teachers to the profession, the challenges of adapting the curricula so that all children could learn. The language challenges were being overcome through the simultaneous live translations. Presenters were building bridges within our collective understandings of the challenges, but also the rewards of teacher education. At the same time, presenters were signifying the importance of investing in quality teacher education around the world – even though the audience reactions might be moments apart.

4. Discussion

In alignment with the auto-ethnographic approach in this study, the moments of heightened language awareness that are presented here, can be explored multidimensionally. As stated for the purpose of this chapter, it will be reconnoitred in terms of emotion, motivation, reinforcement and problem-solving.
The emotional dimensions within the various language 'moments' constitute numerous moments of delight, joy and positive emotion. In the first moment, where the small ritual of drinking tea with Ms Weinberg on a tiny veranda is depicted, the joy of being together, of connecting, of being still transcends the 'language barrier' between a little girl and an elderly woman. Many years later, the moment of insight on accessing another language-world at an early age, and the concomitant personal value it had over a lifetime, presents a subsequent positive emotion of thankfulness and gratitude. The joy also spreads beyond the

actual moments of tea-drinking – in the realization of the long-term benefits of being able to understand and use a language other than a first language. In Moment 2, when describing the inherent affection that is generated by a mother's ability to speak an indigenous language, the close proximity of language use and emotional atmosphere is evident. In this instance, sharing a language landscape seems to generate fondness and personal connection. Moment 3, in turn, portrays the inadvertent *decision-making* processes that are often tied to language at the personal level. It also shows the power of the utility of a language as a scarce field in education. In the moment describing the presentation of clinical case studies during postgraduate Psychology studies (Moment 4), the uncertainty, the startling moments of 'awareness' and the discomfiture with prior verbal language practices, is shown. This moment depicts emotions of surprise, unease, relief and also thoughtfulness. It illustrates how 'the personal' is experienced transversely. The emotions within this clinical case study moment, seem to be slightly related to the slow realization of the unquestioning way in which access to language resources can present over the course of a lifetime (Moment 5). In this instance, the 'matter-of-factness' of accepting the availability to first language tuition at various educational phases and developmental levels becomes the startling emotive trigger. Questioning a status quo and simultaneously recognising the role of the self within it, sparks surprise and reflection. In the playschool moment (Moment 6), the 'emotion' dimension seems to surpass the personal and considers the intricacies of decision-making at the intergenerational level. Implicitly, this moment 'asks', 'how will my children feel' with this educational choice I am making on their behalf? The moment that describes the professional moment of connecting with the German-speaking world (Moment 7), shows the excitement of novelty, and the anticipation of new possibilities. Here, the semiological and interactive functions of language (Langacker, 2002) co-mingles to generate elation and enthusiasm for new understandings of knowledge creation. Similarly, in the Dialogue forum moment (Moment 8), the emotive dimension presents interactively within the timelapses of the enunciations of the speaker and the audience reactions. The in-time translations create slight uncertainty in the speaker, but it also inadvertently creates contemplation, due to the delays of emotional reactions in relation to verbal statements.

The four psychological constructs that serve as navigational markers in this autoethnography are defined by the author, but draw on conceptualisations by various authors (Colman, 2003; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2021; Holtgraves, 2013). In this chapter *emotion* is broadly defined as an inner psychological state that is personal, evaluative, fleeting and related to the affective dimension of the human experience. The evaluative aspect of emotion connects to the

psychological processes underpinning motivation. Here, motivation is defined as a driver of the instigation, direction and continuance of human behaviour. The moments described in this auto-ethnography illustrate some of the conscious, subconscious and unconscious motivations for decisions on language and education. For instance, in the moment that describes the choice of playschool for children, the intergenerational facet of language, education and the emotional dimension of decision-making within it is presented. It shows how values and priorities impact on language decisions for a future generation; and perhaps most importantly, the emotions that are connected to these decisions. In this scenario, we observe the intention to make a sound decision based on seemingly rational decision-making criteria, while also recognizing the 'emotional' factors that drive parental prioritization when it comes to educational choices. In this instance, informal play is prioritised, and language choices thus becomes secondary. Here, education choices seem to be motivated by much more than the choice of language-of-instruction. This is also evident at the subliminal level, as depicted in Moment 5, with the [late] realization that access to first language instruction may have been inadvertent, yet not necessarily intentional. The motivation for educational choices on language may be invisible, involuntary and often only understood retrospectively. It is impacted by various variables that may be concurrently conscious, subconscious and even unconscious.

Reinforcement is defined in this chapter as stimulus that strengthens behavioural responses. From the moments described, reinforcement often presents at the moment where decisions (be it intentional or unintentional) about language and education are questioned. The act of questioning seems to open up moments of pause, which in turn, creates either diversion from previous practices (see moments 2, 4, 6 and 7) or reinforcement of existing ways of doing (see Moments 1, 5 and 8). Engagement on matters of language is often connected to *learning* or the potential to learn in the future. The context within which the questioning takes place, seems to precipitate the way in which language is enacted. A little girl finds solace in a tea-drinking ritual, despite a seeming language barrier; an undergraduate student chooses a subject field that will provide financial support for university studies; a presenter at a dialogue forum adjusts to the delayed (and varied) responses from an audience. At the personal level, language choices are reinforced or redirected on the basis of competing personal preferences, prior practices, the pre-eminence of surrounding choices of others and the levels of acceptance for existing language practices. The psychology of language and language choices is both inter-and intrapersonal.

The final psychological construct that is leveraged in this chapter to explore the psychology of language is problem-solving. Problem-solving is defined as the

cognitive processes that direct behaviour to find solutions to internal or external challenges. Problem-solving is inherently related to emotion, motivation and reinforcement and in the moments depicted here, these intersections are patent. In terms of language and education, problem-solving is rarely unilateral. The ramifications of language of education extend well beyond the quality and levels of learning. Language of education intersperses with affective atmosphere (Moment 2), the purpose of education (Moments 3, 4 and 6), professional development (Moments 5, 7 and 8) and deeply held personal belief systems. It reverberates attitudes and amplifies value systems. In the Dialogue forum moment (Moment 8) we observe the practical problem-solving in the provision of translation services at an international event. We also note the subsequent effects of the use of these problem-solving strategies, albeit only slightly. Problem-solving regarding language in education seeks to contribute constructively, but ultimately it carries both intended and unintended consequences at the personal level.

5. Limitations

The unpredictability of reader responses to auto-ethnographic research has been indicated as a limitation (Bochner & Ellis, 1996), along with the challenges of self-disclosure in terms of the description of personal experiences, thoughts and feelings (Méndez, 2013). The “moments” depicted here have thus been written with fair amounts of trepidation, especially in light of the shifting social context in which they are created. It was constructed over a period of several months and although the final versions are quite succinct, these versions have been edited continuously over this period. As stated earlier, the auto-ethnographic design in this chapter was however intentional, despite an awareness of its limitations. Although auto-ethnography cannot be generalised, it can potentially create novel understandings of a phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

This auto-ethnography intentionally seeks to create dialogic spaces where inclusive participation in language landscapes is fore fronted. It seeks to acknowledge the partiality and reciprocities of language practices in education. The study also actively positions emotion, and the underpinning psychological processes of language, as a lever to support and actively advance language diversity. In the frequently cited Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, a neglected section indicates the importance of "Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, 245). The current study elevates motivation, reinforcement and problem-solving as critical tools to create long-term solutions to multiple educational challenges and strengthening language diversity. As indicated earlier, the study echoes the effects of the psychology of language on literacy levels, language-of-instruction preferences, perception-and-science dichotomies and the socio-political contexts within which language in education is enacted.

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