

## **Student-driven and threshold-concept-informed curricular change in linguistics: reporting on an undergraduate student's research project on troublesome knowledge.**

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This study revolves around the learning, teaching and assessment of grammar awareness to first year undergraduate students in linguistics and investigates a student-centred approach to the ways in which students can be supported in acquiring what Perkins (2006) defines as the “epistemic arsenal” necessary to become a competent linguist. Previous work (Orsini-Jones and Jones 2007; Orsini-Jones 2008) had stressed how the encounter with new knowledge at an academic level also requires students to engage with the subject matter studied in novel ways not experienced before. Therefore the acquisition of the epistemological “armoury” is not sufficient, students also need to be supported in “becoming linguists”, that is to say in engaging with an ontological shift and “visualising” themselves as scholars in linguistics. However, both the epistemological and the ontological dimension of knowledge can prove to be daunting for undergraduate first year students.

As previously discussed (Orsini-Jones 2008:220), very often there appears to be a gap between what students think they know and what they actually know with reference to grammar awareness. Motivational factors also play a major role in the way English students position themselves towards the learning of grammar concepts.

Many undergraduate students educated within the English state system perceive grammar and grammar analysis as “troublesome”. Perkins (2006) and Meyer, Land and Smith (2008) define “troublesome knowledge” as knowledge that can be perceived as “alien”, or counter-intuitive by students. The work carried out with languages students between academic years 2003 and 2008 led to hypothesize that the overarching structure of a sentence also known in linguistics as the “rank scale concept” (e.g. Crystal 2006:251) was “troublesome knowledge” and possibly a “threshold concept” for languages students.

Meyer, Land and Smith (2008: ix-xxi) suggest that the identification of threshold concepts allows tutors to put in place targeted curricular interventions aiming at enhancing the students’ learning experience and making such “troublesome knowledge” less troublesome.

This paper introduces a constructivist ‘spin’ to the investigation into threshold concepts in grammar and illustrates how a student who had experienced the module ‘The Nature of the English Language’ first hand and had realized how troublesome some grammar concepts were for her peers, decided to carry out a curricular intervention aimed at enhancing grammar learning as her final year research project for her dissertation. Working in collaboration with staff, she designed three grammar teaching units informed by the existing relevant threshold concept research and carried out grammar tests (immediate recall) and interviews with students after her intervention. The paper will illustrate how she administered the units and how she evaluated the impact of her project in collaboration with staff via a comparison of her results with those obtained by students in the relevant summative tasks for the module. The paper will finally illustrate how her findings will feed into the design of the module *The Nature of the English Language* in a new cycle of student-driven action-research-led curricular change.

## References:

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