

# Exploration Of Emotional Experiences Of Learning English First Additional Language: Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This poetic autoethnography inquiry explored the emotional language learning experiences of the writer during his schooling years when learning English First Additional Language. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the writer's particular experiences and emotions through ten autobiographical poems and their analysis. The methodology used to collect data and the writer's context of second language learning is outlined to get a good perspective of the writer's emotional language learning experiences. As a result, the poems are categorized in accordance with challenges and success of learning a second language, methods used in teaching and learning a second language, contact with Americans and diverse culture. This categorization explicitly explains and reveals the writer's understanding of second language learning and emotions and contributes to the understanding of experiences as a social, cultural, and educational phenomenon. Most poems reflect the writer's challenges and successes of learning second language. These poems present a complex progression and transformation of emotions on the part of the writer. These emotions include anxiety, inferiority complex, anger, frustration, confusion, disappointment and excitement or enjoyment. These emotions reveal the writer's custom of first language usage and willingness to learn second language despite his disapproval. The writer's success to learn English is interwoven with the approaches used by his teachers to make second language learning interesting and educative. The writer's second language learning experiences through diverse cultures where he met students from different countries exposes him to language choice and usage in different context with the same form. This emotional experience harmonizes social interaction while second language learning becomes easier to the writer. In conclusion, the emotions presented in this paper about second language learning tend to be more positive than negative. However, the challenges of using second language in a classroom setting and outside the class offer the opportunity to understand these experiences from the writer's perspective.

**Keywords:** Multilingual society, autobiographical poems, language identity, emotional experience, grammatical rules.

## Introduction

Poetry is written in response to the lived events but is then at a later stage integrated into an autoethnographic account that both narrativizes and reflects on the experiences presented. It is through the process of externalized experience in writing, questioning, self-observation, and discussion of that writing that understanding of oneself emerges (Megan, Brown, Kelly & Finn, 2021). Motlhaka (2022) identified poetry as one of the "creative literary genres" that can be used for "imaginative-creative writing" to "express autobiographical experiences" in autoethnographic research and scaffolding individual's individual voices. In other words, autoethnographic poetry reveals some experience of the researcher, shedding light on aspects of life from personal experiences that would not traditionally be considered data (Hanauer, 2021). As seen in the

scholarship on poetry writing, rewriting activates a process of emotional and cognitive insight leading to increased emotional clarity (Peskin & Ellenbogen, 2019). The rewriting or refocusing process brings with it the need to explore what has been expressed and questioning its accuracy in terms of experienced events. In other words, Poetic autoethnography involves a particular form of witnessing of personal events. Autoethnography is a self-reflexive research genre in which the multifaceted, contingent self of the researcher becomes a lens through which to study interrelationships between personal histories, lived experiences, and wider sociocultural concerns (Zhang, 2020; Pithouse-Morgan, Naicker & Pillay, 2017). This suggests that self-reflexive methodologies are connected by a common focus on acknowledging, questioning, and reimagining the lived experiences and self of the researcher. In this study, poetic autoethnography as both a research and self-reflexive process functions through a similar mechanism of second language learning experiences. Therefore, conducting the research and writing the poems helped me re-examine and better understand my own journey as a second language student and a poet-researcher. The methodology used to collect data and the writer's context of second language learning is outlined to get a good perspective of the writer's emotional language learning experiences. As a result, the poems are categorized in accordance with challenges and success of learning a second language, methods used in teaching and learning a second language, contact with Americans and diverse culture. In this study, this categorization explicitly explains and reveals the writer's understanding of second language learning and emotions and contributes to the understanding of experiences as a social, cultural, and educational phenomenon.

### Methodology

The poetic autoethnography presented here used writing as a research methodology. The data for this study consist of 10 autobiographical poems of the writer. He wrote them in two weeks by closing his eyes and imagined what was like when he was learning English First Additional Language. The theme of the poems is about his emotional experiences of second language learning and usage outside the classroom.

### Context

In South Africa, English is a prerequisite to all learners to enroll in class since it is a medium of instruction in learning and teaching throughout the schooling to higher learning institutions (colleges and universities). Most learners learn English First Additional Language (EFAL) as a school subject because 91% of the population are not first language speakers. The writer only had contact with English at school because at home he speaks his first language (Xitsonga) since there was no one to help him for expanded opportunities, but from grade 9, he expanded the learning of English at home through watching TV and speaking and writing to his friends in English.

### Result and Discussion

This section of the paper will discuss the writer's experiences and emotions about his second language learning and usage. It is categorized as follows: challenges and successes of learning a second language, methods used in teaching and learning second language, contact with Americans, and second language and diverse culture.

### Challenges and successes of learning second language

#### *A lost student*

An invasive English

Took away

My language identity,

Xitsonga.....!

In grade 1

In her class

I was like

A ship in the middle of the sea

During a violent

And stormy weather

Frustration and confusion

Built up

I tossed and turned

My tongue

Without any success

Like a sinking ship

This is an autobiography poem written by the writer trying to describe his emotions when he first got contact with English First Additional Language. This poem starts with personification "An invasive English" which explicitly represents the writer's discomfort about English becoming a medium of instruction at school. He is

disappointed that English has surpassed the use of Xitsonga as a medium of instruction in grade 1. Furthermore, he is upset because the use of English erodes his language identity (Xitsonga). In the second stanza, he tells about the immediate instruction and utterance of English words by the teacher which cement or guarantee the beginning and existence of English despite his disapproval. In stanza three, the writer's dismay or confusion continues whenever he is in class because of English usage not Xitsonga. This idea is well portrayed when he compared himself with a ship in the middle of the sea during a violent and stormy weather. This comparison shows how vulnerable and submissive the writer is because he has no control or having no influence to change the situation rather than to succumb and hoping for the best. The simile also tells how indecisive the writer is regarding continuing with his classes. The last stanza further describes this situation. The writer's frustration and confusion become pervasive when the teacher asked them to repeat English words after her which was a mountainous effort to the writer. This scene is precisely emphasized by the use of the phrase "tossed and turned." The writer used this idiom to express his difficulty of uttering English words despite his numerous efforts.

This poem presents a complex progression of feelings concerning the usage of second language in a first language setting. The description primarily focuses on the explicit emotions of the writer to use second language in class instead of first language. These emotions include anger, frustration, confusion and disappointment. The emotional transformation in the poem can be seen as the writer's desperation to continue using his first language in a class setting and a continued frustration of using English. Interestingly, the writer tries to learn English despite his disapproval "An invasive English" but without any success. The next poem describes the emotional experience of learning verbs using grammatical rules.

### ***English Words in Motion***

Easy ride of a bike  
But dangerous...!  
On potholes streets or roads  
It seemed complicated  
When grammatical rules  
Are applied  
A verb makes a statement!  
Yeah, a verb tells it like it is!  
Past, present, future tense!  
And learning verbs  
Became exciting and less confusing  
Verb you're so intense and commanding!

The above poem starts with the image of "easy ride of a bike" in which the writer compares the learning of verbs without the introduction of grammatical rules being easy. However, the writer asserts the difficulty he experienced in learning verbs when grammatical rules were introduced. The writer presents his emotional difficulty of learning verbs by comparing the introduction of grammatical rules with riding a bike on potholes streets or roads. The first stanza reflects the writer's emotional frustration or uncertainty of understanding verbs whenever grammatical rules are applied. In the last stanza, the writer seems to understand the functions of verbs in a sentence. This understanding makes it possible for the writer to start enjoying the learning of verbs which becomes less confusing than it was at the beginning of the poem. The writer is definitely more conversant to apply grammatical rules on verb usage in different situations i.e. past, present and future tense. This emotional transformation makes the writer to be excited about the correct usage of verbs in a spoken and written language. The next poem brings the writer more closely to second language learning outside the classroom by using the book independently.

### ***In a briefcase***

In a briefcase on my shoulder  
Hanging daily by my arm  
Is a book that seems to be  
An answer to all my questions  
I got it yesterday  
I hadn't heard about it  
And now I wonder how to use it  
Where my English will have to change  
The book is blue like sky  
The pages white and black  
The sentences rich and clear  
Like a wealthy bank account  
It hangs there on my shoulder  
Waiting for me to start  
Conversation so rich and clear  
I open it everyday

Tell it all my objectives  
 It helps me get my reading right  
 Reassured me of dreams coming through

The above poem explores and offers the writer expanded opportunities to independently have contact with second language through the use of a book. In the first stanza, the writer expresses his hope and success of learning second language through the image of a briefcase hanging on his arm containing a book. The writer believes that a book contained in the briefcase seems to answer all his questions about how to learn second language. This introduces a critical position of the writer about second language. This idea is expressed in line two when the writer says “hanging daily by my arm.” It emphasizes the importance of the book in the writer’s life since they seem inseparable. Moreover, the writer craves for knowledge contained in the book. In the second stanza, the writer provides a contrary view about the book which introduces the feeling of uncertainty. In stanza three, he uses metaphor and simile to illustrate the layout of the book and the quality of information contained in it. This stanza reveals how the writer admires and appreciates what the book has to offer. This notion tells how eager the writer wants to read the book with a hope of enhancing his second language. In his final stanza, the writer objectively reads the book and is excited because he learned to read correctly, and becomes optimistic in his quest of learning English as second language. The ending presents consolidating emotions in stanza one, three and four that eagerness and excitement to use the book, rather than the uncertainty shown in stanza two where the writer is unsure of the book usage and how will it help him. The next poem positions the writer in an exciting learning environment of second language regarding spelling:

### ***Spelling***

It felt  
 So wonderful  
 When I first spelled  
 My name, Hlavisio  
 Using English  
 Alphabet  
 I felt connected  
 To the world  
 Gradually,  
 My vocabulary tank  
 Was enriched with  
 Meanings to my second language.

This poem explores the writer’s ability to correctly spell English words or combining alphabet to give meaningful words. In the first stanza, the writer is excited for being able to spell his name “Hlavisio” using alphabet. This excitement explicitly reveals the writer’s prior knowledge about spelling his name and other words in his first language. An interesting aspect in this stanza is the discovery of new knowledge by the writer. The last stanza integrates his excitement with confidence of using English words more often. The writer feels more closely with English speakers because his “vocabulary tank” is gradually getting used to second language words. This notion suggests that the writer’s correct spelling knowledge will help him improve his second language learning more effectively and that makes him excited and wanting to share his knowledge with others, when he says “I felt connected to the world.” The next poem explores the feelings of the writer as a second language student educator in an undergraduate classroom learning language theories.

### ***Language theories***

How second language  
 Is learnt and acquired  
 It is still a nightmare  
 To me  
 Knowing that  
 A child has  
 An innate ability  
 To acquire language  
 Has been a comprehensive  
 Theory to take home for me  
 Because I acquired  
 Many languages  
 Without formal training or guidance  
 From speakers of the language  
 With no exception to English  
 Contracting theories  
 Deepened my anxiety and frustration

Of how a language is learnt or acquired  
 Despite vast or mountainous  
 Evidence to support their claims or hypotheses  
 Oh..! What kind of  
 An animal is language?

The first stanza describes the writer's continued emotional misunderstanding of how second language is learnt and acquired. He used the word "nightmare" to illustrate his emotional difficulty in trying to figure out which theory is good because they give contradicting information though there is a slight agreement on how language is learnt and acquired. As an aspiring second language teacher, this misunderstanding becomes a nightmare to him. In the second stanza, his knowledge about a child's innate ability to acquire language has been a comprehensive theory to understand. In the next stanza, he gives his personal experience of acquiring second language without formal training or guidance from the speaker of a target language. The last stanza describes his emotional frustration experiences as his professor introduces him to different theories that less support each other but with more contradicting information such as Chomsky's LAD (Language Acquisition Device), Bruner's LASS (Language Acquisition Support System), Krashen's theory of second language acquisition's hypotheses, etc. The last two lines of the forth stanza indicate his continued frustration about second language learning and acquisition theories despite evidence supporting their claims or hypotheses. The next poem presents the actual emotional language experiences which reflect the writer's excitement of using second language through presentation.

### ***My teacher's face***

Smiling face,  
 Reassuring  
 And encouraging  
 Proudly believing  
 In me  
 Like a mother's love  
 To a child  
 Suddenly,  
 I regained  
 My confidence  
 Words came out  
 Of my mouth  
 Coherently and cohesively  
 I wish,  
 I can relive the moment  
 It brought the best  
 Out of me  
 That makes me  
 Who I'm today

The poem starts with an image of a "smiling face." This image refers to his teacher's face filled with smile as he was standing in front to start with his presentation. Before he went in front, he was scared, having inferior complexity about second language. However, when he keeps eye contact with his teacher's smiling face that reassures, encourages and proudly believing in him. He started to ignore the negative thoughts that hinder his potential in relation to second language. He used the simile "like a mother's love to a child" to emphasized the professional and parental role played by the teacher in helping him to learn second language. The teacher patiently encourages him to work hard and concentrates on his strength as a starting point to minimise his weaknesses. The second stanza presents his excitement emotional experiences in which he stopped stammering during his presentation. This emotional transformation is attributed to his teacher's smiling face which helps him regain his confidence. He presented his speech coherently and cohesively to the applause of his classmates. This improves his speaking skills such that he can proudly communicate his ideas without any fear and with the will to learn whenever he is in a conversation. The last stanza affirms the idea introduced in the second stanza that shows how his speaking skills have improved. He feels excited and wishes he can do a presentation more often because he was able to do his presentation as planned and answer questions raised by his classmates and teacher regarding his topic. He also like the input brought by his classmates and teacher in improving his presentation and speaking skills. Finally, he can confidently tell that learning second language through presentation is informative because he was unsure of his speaking skills and speaking in front of people. However, nowadays he doesn't hesitate to communicate his ideas in front of people, thanks to his teacher's attitude towards him.

### **Methods used in teaching and learning second language**

In the next poem, the method and the writer's emotions during his pronunciation class are described. In this case, a shared responsibility between the teacher and the writer prevails regarding pronunciation and making the method educative and interesting.

### **Pronunciation**

Pronouncing English words

Was as sweet as a honey

In my ears

Especially, words like; excuse, adore, caress, etc.

Drilling method

Makes my pronunciation class

More interesting

And educative

I found myself having a conversation

With Queen Elizabeth,

Being at a Sydney and Miami beaches

Converging with Americans and Australians.

The first stanza clearly expresses how the writer feels when he first pronounces English words. The feeling is emphasized by the use of a simile “sweet as a honey” which clearly shows how the sounds of English words bring pleasure to the writer. In this case, the writer compares the pleasure of sounds with the taste of a honey, especially words such as excuse, caress, etc. The second stanza introduces the teaching method used by the teacher. From the writer’s perspective, the method is more funny and educative. The writer uses oxymoron to describe the teaching method in his pronunciation class. This means that the writer finds himself funny whenever he has to repeat words modelled by the teacher but in the process the method becomes educative to him. The last stanza projects an imaginative situation wherein the writer converges with people in countries where English is a first language. This reveals his confidence and ability to utter words in a meaningful and comprehensive conversation using British, American and Australian accent. The next poem is about the method, the writer finds fascinating to enhance his listening skills using a recording.

### **Listening**

Our ears were glued

To the recording

Like a ship captain

Who carefully

Sails the ship in a stormy weather

The recording helps us

Identify our strength and weaknesses

On the text to get

A general idea

And reduce our anxiety

The teacher was using

Dictogloss method

Which brought comfort

And communicative competence

About different sounds and intonation patterns

The poem starts by describing a learning environment in which students are attentively listening to a recording of first language speakers. The recording is about conversations and lectures between first language speakers. The writer exaggerates the manner in which they are paying attention to the recording when he says “our ears were glued to the recording. Furthermore, he compares their attentiveness with a ship captain who carefully sails the ship in a stormy weather. From a literal perspective, it describes the writer’s and his classmates’ interest and willingness to learn English accent without any impediment. In the next stanza, the writer acknowledges the importance of second language learning. The phrase “strength and weaknesses” is critical in the role played by the recording in enhancing the writer’s listening skills. The last stanza introduces the method used by teacher which the writer seems to be more comfortable with and that yields positive results as far as communicative competence is concerned. What fascinates the writer in this poem is the idea of listening to the recording and analysing the text with classmates through dictogloss method which gives him the opportunity to exchange ideas through communication. Therefore, listening takes place throughout the lesson. Lastly, the writer is excited to know different sounds and intonation patterns that will help him become a good speaker in relation to pronunciation.

### **Contact with Americans**

The next poem explores the emotional experience of second language of the writer when he arrives in America.

### **Social interaction**

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Int. Airport, Georgia

Coffee shop

Oh...! difficult and demotivating  
 With first language speakers  
 My English proficiency  
 Was reduced to zero  
 First language speakers  
 Couldn't understand me  
 Despite me understanding them  
 This frustration and confusion  
 Is attributed  
 To accent and disbelief

The poem starts with the name of the airport to signify the arrival of the writer in America as a point of entry from his home country. The writer is disappointed and demotivated by the reaction of American at the airport when he tries to talk to a lady in a coffee shop. This event leads to frustration on the part of the writer. He felt like he has been brainwashed because he has been communicating with first language speakers in his home country without any problem. In the last stanza, the writer concludes that the confusion and frustration were caused by different accent and disbelief from first language speakers that the writer could speak English so fluently while coming from the Republic of South Africa. Therefore, the writer has acknowledged the stereotype of individuals and intends to work hard to improve English as second language despite challenges of different accent and dialect.

### **Second language and diverse culture**

The next poem explores the feelings of a second language writer in an ESL classroom.

#### ***Diverse culture***

Diverse classroom,  
 Oh Chinese, Japanese, Africans, Asians, etc...!  
 Brought a luggage  
 Full of words choice and usage  
 Of second language  
 Now I can open  
 My wings and  
 Fly throughout the world  
 The world is in my palm  
 Within the context of language usage

The poem starts by describing diverse classroom consists of nationals from China, Japan, Africa, Asian countries and many more. The writer is puzzled by how different nations choose and use second language words differently in different situation without changing their forms. This experience has actually exposes the writer to an understanding of how words are used differently in different parts of the world. For example, hissing means disapproval in the U.S., but asks for group silence in the Spanish-speaking countries, shaking hands/head for Chinese and shrug for native English speakers are both forms of disagreement, ignorance or baffle, 'arm in arm'. It is appropriate between spouses, lovers or between young men and women in English countries. But in China, it is only found between man and woman as lovers, or between the same sexes as intimates, or between children and parents to show care, help, or respect to the elders from the young. The writer uses the word "luggage" to emphasize the benefit of learning from his classmates whose prior knowledge of second language is valued. In the last stanza, the writer is more confident that he can use second language appropriately in different parts of the world without offending people. This idea is clearly indicated in the last two lines when the writer says "The world is in my palm within the context of language usage."

### **Conclusion**

The writer's emotional second language learning experiences show that he has experienced few challenges and plenty of good experiences in the learning. The data collected explicitly support that. Every poem reflects the writer's specific meaningful experience and understanding of second language learning. The writer's experiences are organized into four categories as part of the analysis of data. The writer's poems were generated in the context of his emotional second language learning experiences and cannot be generalized. Most poems reflect the writer's challenges and successes of learning second language. These poems present a complex progression and transformation of emotions on the part of the writer. These emotions include anxiety, inferiority complex, anger, frustration, confusion, disappointment and excitement or enjoyment. These emotions reveal the writer's custom of first language usage and willingness to learn second language despite his disapproval. The writer's success to learn a second language is interwoven with the approaches used by his teacher to make second language learning interesting and educative. In this case, the learning environment was autonomous such that the writer was able to express his views and learn from his classmates, while the teacher facilitates and intervenes where necessary. This kind of learning environment instills a sense of responsibility and accountability to the writer as far as a second language is concerned. Contact with Americans

brought with it embarrassment and inferiority complex because there was misunderstanding between the writer and first language speakers. It was as a result of different accent and dialect that single out the writer as a foreigner. However, the writer strives to learn American accent and dialect through frequent contact with American students which helps him improve his English. Lastly, the writer's second language learning experiences through diverse cultures where he met students from different countries exposes the writer to language choice and usage in different context with the same form. This emotional experience harmonizes social interaction while second language learning becomes easier to the writer. In conclusion, the emotions presented in this paper about second language learning tend to be more positive than negative. However, the challenges of using second language in a classroom setting and outside the class offer the opportunity to understand these experiences from the writer's perspective.

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