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2014
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Nyamupangedengu, E. (2014). Finding a voice: Reflections on a long journey from silent student to confident teacher educator. South African Journal of Higher Education, 28(6), 2065-2078.

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Finding a voice: Reflections on a long journey from silent student to confident teacher educator

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Abstract

In this article, the author narrates and reflects on challenges that she has faced throughout her academic journey from being a school learner and a university student to a teacher and a teacher educator – challenges that she attributes mainly to her limited communicative competence in English. This reflective examination of her experiences is informed by Bourdieu's (1991) cultural capital theory (CCT), specifically the concepts of habitus, field and linguistic capital. The author argues that the ability to speak, read and write English in Zimbabwe, her own country, and in South Africa constitutes linguistic capital and that those who do not possess such capital may have limited access to a country's desirable goods and positions. Based on what she has experienced, she makes some recommendations for recognising and nurturing students' home language, while at the same time, because English has become such a powerful language locally and globally, creating chances for students to become proficient in this language in order to maximise their opportunities in life.

Keywords: linguistic capital, communicative competence, gender positioning

INTRODUCTION

It is two o'clock in the afternoon. Nine biology students are standing outside the zoology lab. The class is made up of three female students (two black and one Indian) and six male students (all black). I am one of the two black female students. We are waiting to write a practical test. I am quite nervous but I am confident that I have prepared thoroughly for the test. The test is comprised of two questions. Question one requires us to dissect a frog and then use an electrocardiogram to measure the frog's heartbeat. Question two is on [the] diversity of animals. I start off with question one. I do the dissection, followed by electrocardiography. The sheet with the graphic record must be processed by dipping it in a special type of liquid and allowing it to dry. So I process the sheet with the graph and hang it up to dry. As I wait for the sheet to dry, I move on to question two. Question two is based on [the] animals on display. Station one displays two different birds. The feathers of these birds are spread out as if the birds are in flight. The task is to identify and describe the visible differences between the feathers of the two birds. The differences can be seen clearly but I just

can't find the vocabulary to describe them. I am standing there helpless. I am getting desperate. I gather some courage. I move to the next station near where my Indian classmate is working. I politely ask her to come with me to the birds' station. I show her the differences between the feathers of the two birds and admit that I don't know how to describe these differences. Without agonising about it, she says, 'Oh, you can say this one is fluffy and has smooth edges and the other one has a hard texture and the edges are rough.' She moves back to her work and I write down what she said. I move on to the next station but the story is the same. I cannot describe the features that I see on the displayed animals and I cannot keep on asking because it is a test. Suddenly, I feel exhausted and ill. I cannot continue with the practical. I can't tell the demonstrator or lecturer what has really happened but they can see that I am not well. I am allowed to go. They ask me if I would want to continue with the practical the following morning and I say no. They look surprised. I pack my things and walk out of the lab. How could I explain to my lecturer that I did not have the vocabulary to describe my observations? How can one be at university and still be unable to use the language of instruction? Isn't using correct and appropriate descriptions in English part of the assessment outcomes?

In this article, I use narrative to reflectively examine some of my experiences of learning and teaching in an English-medium environment as an English Second Language[1] (ESL) learner, teacher and teacher educator. The narrative is an account of how I have struggled throughout my academic journey due to my limited communicative competence (Hymes 1972, 280) in this second language. As a school learner and a university student I was unable to contribute my ideas to the classroom discussions. When I made the transition from student to teacher and eventually to teacher educator, I continued to lack confidence in speaking English in some contexts, even though I recognised that I could now read and write the language proficiently. In some instances, my limited linguistic competence was the main problem, and in others, my limited sociocultural and strategic competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell 1995, 9). Before turning to the reflective narrative, I briefly outline the theoretical perspectives which inform it.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This reflective examination of my experiences is informed by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (CCT) (1991, 12–14), specifically the concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *linguistic capital*. Habitus is a system of dispositions pertaining to an individual that result from social training and experience, that is, dispositions to act in a certain way; to grasp experience in a certain way; and to think in a certain way (Grenfell and James 1998, 14–18). Habitus includes a person's values and it acts as a 'lens through which the individual sees the world and his/her consequent actions' (Ringenberg, McElwee and Israel 2009). A field is a 'structured system of social relations at micro and macro level' (Grenfell and James 1998, 16). When an individual's habitus is consistent with the field in which he/she is operating, that is, when the field is familiar

and aids understanding by the individual, he/she is likely to enjoy a social advantage (Grenfell and James 1998, 21; Lareau and Horvat 1999).

Cultural capital refers to the possession of cultural goods, resources (eg, books and computers) and dispositions, such as knowledge, skills and connections to education-related institutions (eg, schools, universities, libraries), a positive attitude towards school, parental support, ease in dealing with authority and linguistic competence (Grenfell and James 1998, 74; Morrison and Lui 2000). Linguistic capital, defined by Morrison and Lui (2000, 473) as 'fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, world-wide language, which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status in local and global society', is a type of cultural capital. Individuals who have inherited cultural capital in the process of habitus formation in their families, in relation to the values and practices of a particular field, for example the field of the educational system, are likely to be more successful players than others in that field (Grenfell and James 1998, 21). By contrast, individuals with less cultural capital are likely to encounter constraints that result in unequal access to the resources in that field.

Linguistic capital may be a key factor in assisting students to gain access to the country's desirable goods and positions, as competence in the language of learning (medium of instruction) enables them to engage comfortably with and to take up the school knowledge they are learning. The possession of linguistic capital is also associated with the acquisition and use of other forms of capital which then empower people possessing such capital to succeed in the struggle for social status and recognition (Bourdieu 1991, 55–57). The degree of linguistic capital that people possess is likely to be influenced by whether the language is their first or second language but also by their background and cultural inheritance. While it is possible to acquire the linguistic capital required to become communicatively competent in a powerful additional language (eg, English), such acquisition can be enabled or constrained by socio-cultural contexts inside and outside the classroom. What constitutes communicative competence is the subject of a long-running debate in the applied linguistic literature. In the article, I draw on the framework proposed by Celce-Murcia et al (1995, 9) which includes five components, namely: (i) discourse competence; (ii) linguistic competence; (iii) actional competence; (iv) sociocultural competence; and (v) strategic competence.

Discourse competence 'concerns the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, sentences and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text' (Celce-Murcia et al 1995, 13). To achieve *discourse competence* a speaker or writer needs to draw on his/her *linguistic competence* (ie, knowledge of syntax, morphology, lexis and of the phonological and orthographic systems needed for communication in speech or writing); *sociocultural competence* (ie, knowledge of how to communicate appropriately in a particular social and cultural context); and *actional competence* (ie, knowledge of language functions, eg, in interpersonal exchanges, in requesting information, in persuading or criticising). *Strategic competence* is particularly valuable to speakers of an additional language. It includes knowledge of strategies

for repairing breakdowns in conversation and finding alternative ways of expressing meaning.

The reflections in the article also draw on the work of Cummins (1979, 1981) whose interest in the different periods of time typically needed by immigrant children to acquire conversational fluency in a new language, and to acquire the proficiency required for success in a particular grade at school, led him to distinguish between what he terms basic interpersonal communicative fluency (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). As explained by Clarence-Fincham (2000), BICS is required for conducting informal conversations in everyday contexts and CALP for success in more complex academic tasks. From his research with immigrant children in Canada, Cummins (1981) concluded that while many children could achieve BICS in about two years, a period of five to seven years was required, on average, for these children to approximate the norm for their grade in using English for academic purposes. However, Cummins (1981) studied children who had both need and opportunity to use the new language outside the classroom which would enhance the development of BICS, a situation very different from the experiences with a new language, to which I now turn.

MY EARLY LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES

I was born in the town of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. I am the second child in a family of seven, two boys and five girls. My father was a primary school teacher and my mother was a nurse. I grew up in a rural area, in a community where everyone spoke Shona. Although my parents could speak English fluently, we never communicated in English either at home or in the community as it was regarded as being disrespectful to speak to adults in English. Moreover, not all members of the community could speak or understand English, so speaking English was never practised in my home or community.

I did part of my primary schooling at a day school near our rural home. My parents then sent my sister and me to a mission primary school for girls when I was in Grade 6. It was a boarding school not far from our home. Throughout primary school, though English was the official language of instruction, a lot of Shona was used. Not much attention was paid to oral English competency for the learners. The Grade 7 English that we were taught emphasised grammar and comprehension, and the Grade 7 national examinations also tested grammar and were in the form of multiple choice questions. I passed Grade 7 very well and proceeded to high school. However, my limited opportunities to either speak or write English meant that I left primary school neither able to use English for what Cummins (1979, 1981) terms BICS, nor did I have what he terms CALP.

A SILENT STUDENT

At high school I became a silent student. Two problems silenced me. The first one was the problem of language. Even though we could speak our home language (Shona) freely outside the classroom, in class we were expected to speak English. Although I had passed the Grade 7 national English examination with good marks, I found it very difficult to speak English fluently and accurately. I would make pronunciation and grammatical errors (limited linguistic competence). Learners who had come from towns and private schools and could speak English well would laugh at me and others like me. Although there was no punishment imposed on those who made mistakes when speaking English, I just could not stand being laughed at. The environment was too 'hostile' for me to interact orally in English. In Krashen's (1978) terms my affective filter was too high. This situation was worsened by the fact that in my home community I could not speak English for the reasons mentioned earlier. Speaking English there was also regarded by your peers as showing off. This prohibition on using English was detrimental to the acquisition of sociocultural and strategic competence in English. As a result of this lack of linguistic capital I developed an inferiority complex when it came to speaking my second language. To 'protect' myself from humiliation, I withdrew from the activities that required me to speak in English. In class, I hardly participated for fear of being ridiculed. I just could not gather enough courage to express myself orally in English. I would sit quietly, listen and work in silence, excluded from classroom interactions. My voice was muted by my fear of a socio-cultural environment that I perceived as hostile.

The second problem that silenced me related to gender positioning. At Form III level (Grade 10), the school had a system of screening learners according to ability. After Form III, I found myself in one of the high ability classes. In this class of 45, there were only three girls. I was excited to be in this top class and I worked hard from day one. Initially, the girls got along well with our male classmates but when we started to write tests and our marks were found to be way above theirs, their attitude towards us changed. The boys felt that we were invading their space. It was as if we were attacking their egos. We were not free in that class anymore. We felt isolated as any boy who befriended us was seen as a traitor. As a result of this threatening environment, my fear of speaking English worsened. I could not even think of expressing my ideas in class for fear of being laughed at and being ridiculed by the boys. I completely 'lost' my voice and became what Planas and Setati (2009, 39) have called a 'silent student'.

Although the boys silenced me, this experience served as an eye opener to some of the harsh realities of being a woman; the likely battles that I might have to fight as a female. In my family, when I was growing up, every child was equally important and special regardless of their gender or age. My exposure to gender discrimination aroused in me a determination to show my male classmates that what they were regarding as their space was also my space. I worked like one possessed and my hard work paid off as I passed my Ordinary Level exams (O-Levels) as one of the top scholars at the school and proceeded to Advanced Level studies (A-Levels).

For my A-Levels, I chose to take up science subjects. The Cambridge syllabus that the country followed at that time required that after O-Levels, learners chose only three subjects that they studied in depth for two years in preparation for a university education. The choice of A-Level subjects was crucial as it influenced a student's subsequent career path. This was my main motivation for choosing the science subjects as there were many career opportunities for those with science passes. There was also prestige in doing science subjects as a girl: people would openly admire your 'courage'. As a top scholar, my teachers also expected me to choose the tough science subjects. All these factors outweighed my fear of going again into a male-dominated area (four girls in a class of 32). I passed my A-Levels and secured a place to study for a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree at the University of Zimbabwe.

The BSc students were a large group so lectures were presented in large lecture rooms. This presented me with new challenges because I could not understand the English accents of my lecturers who were mostly English-speaking whites. I could hardly hear what they were saying during lectures. It was very stressful to sit in a two-hour lecture but not to hear or understand anything. I would sit down and just copy everything that was written on the board, hoping that when I went back to the residence to go through the notes I would make sense of everything. This was not easy, especially with Maths. I had to rely heavily on tutorials to catch up. What worsened my situation was that I was afraid of asking questions because of that fear of being laughed at. The thought of asking a question in class generated extreme anxiety in me and so I never dared ask one.

Despite the above challenges, I was determined to pass. I made sure I attended every lecture, every practical and every tutorial. In the end, I passed my first year and this motivated me to continue. I passed Biology so well that I was given an option of specialising in this subject, which I accepted. So after my first year, I followed what was called an Honours track in which I specialised in Biological Sciences for two years. Although we were now a small group of students in the Biology Honours class, the group was still dominated by male students. The situation had however improved a little because among the lecturers there were now two black women whose accent was similar to mine. Therefore, I could more easily follow what was said in lectures.

It was when I was a second-year student that I experienced the incident described in the vignette at the beginning of the article. I abandoned the practical because I could not cope with the linguistic demands of the practical test. I did not have the appropriate vocabulary to answer the questions. My classmate had the linguistic competence to access the practices of biology although she used non-specialist vocabulary in her description of the differences between the birds. This incident shows that proficiency in the language of instruction is a form of capital which can be converted to academic reward. When I failed the practical, instead of feeling sorry for myself I decided that I needed to learn from others. So when the practical test scripts were returned, I asked my classmates who had done well if I could borrow their scripts so that I could do corrections. From that time onwards, it became my

strategy. For every task that we did, whether I had passed it or not, I would always borrow my classmates' scripts to see how they had responded. The exercise helped me to correct my mistakes and to expand my knowledge of the subject and its specialist vocabulary. I was on my way to achieving CALP. Through these efforts my academic performance greatly improved and I graduated with an Honours degree in Biological Sciences a year later.

FINDING MY VOICE

As honours students, we were encouraged to apply for master's degrees. So, towards the end of my honours degree, I decided that I wanted to do a master's in plant protection. Zimbabwe's economy was at that time anchored in agriculture and by venturing into that area I could make a contribution to the growth of the economy. Since the final results would only come out three months later, the whole group decided to apply for teaching posts. At that time, there was an extreme shortage of science teachers and so it was just a matter of making oneself available and then being assigned to a school immediately. I was the only one in the whole group who chose to be posted to a rural school. The rest of the group wanted to teach in urban areas. My reason for wanting a rural post was simple. I was afraid of being laughed at by the urban children who were proficient in English. I was posted to a mission school where I found myself being the first female to join the science department. Being a lone figure in a male environment became part of my life. The scenario always garnered great admiration from my colleagues and students but also with it came the 'we-want-to-see' attitude. As a female science teacher I was always in a situation where I had to prove a point: that women can also teach science. The headmaster wanted me to teach A-Level biology. I requested that I be allowed to teach Forms I to IV for a start. I was still experiencing extreme anxiety as far as speaking English was concerned so I wanted to learn to teach in English in a non-threatening environment. I needed to find my voice and I imagined that the young rural learners would afford me that chance. I thank my first headmaster for affording me a space in which to develop the confidence that I needed to do my job well.

The learners were well-disciplined and eager to learn. They paid no attention to the way I spoke English and I made sure that I also created an environment in which learners in my classes could express themselves freely in English without fear of being laughed, at if what they said happened to be inaccurate. I kept on reminding the learners that everyone was in my class to learn – including learning to speak English. The socio-cultural environment was therefore conducive for both myself as an ESL educator and for the English second language learners. Working with these learners and seeing how they looked up to me for their own success developed in me a passion for teaching that I could not shake off. I fell in love with the teaching profession and forgot about my fears. Instead of going back to university to proceed with a master's degree, I went back only two years later to study for a professional qualification in teaching and became a qualified high school teacher.

After obtaining my professional qualification, I was moved to another rural school and then to an urban school. I was no longer afraid of teaching at an urban school. My confidence had grown during the three years that I had taught in rural areas. As I had anticipated, teaching in rural schools had provided me with a non-threatening environment in which to learn to teach in English with confidence. What also boosted my confidence was that I understood I had something important to offer to the learners which they were also eager to acquire: knowledge. However, teaching biology in English is quite different from speaking the language in social contexts. So, although I was now a confident teacher in the classroom, I still lacked confidence outside it. In contrast to what Cummins (1981) argues, in my own estimation, it had been easier for me to become proficient in the academic language of Biology than to express myself in the social language of the staffroom. While I was no longer intimidated by being a lone figure in the midst of male teachers, I still could not get over the fear of being laughed at if I expressed my ideas in 'broken' English. So I was a silent member of staff. I had found my voice in the classroom but not in the meetings or in discussions with other teachers.

THE TURNING POINT

My relocation to South Africa was the catalyst for overcoming my fear of speaking English. Firstly, I found myself in an environment in which I could only communicate in English. Whilst this made life difficult for me, this situation forced me to speak English for everyday communication. I did not have the luxury of code-switching to my home language. I just had to speak English. Secondly, as soon as I had relocated, I enrolled at a university for a Master of Science (MSc) degree. During classes I found myself opening up and contributing without any fear of speaking 'broken' English. Just as with my biology teaching, this confidence was because I felt that I had knowledge to contribute to the discussion and no one (including the lecturer) course paid attention to anyone's perceived 'poor English' unless it hindered communication. What was emphasised in this master's class was the ability to put ideas across and to communicate. The lecturer created a learning environment which was conducive for me as an ESL speaker and it made me forget my fears.

While I was interacting with other students in the MSc programme and in conversations with other people, I was able to pick up words in English (said in appropriate contexts) that are important for everyday communication. It was through this process that I eventually acquired the everyday English language proficiency that I had struggled to attain all my life. By acquiring BICS, I have overcome my fear and finally found my voice both inside and outside the classroom. What is interesting to note here is that my fear of speaking English, which silenced me as a learner, was socially produced as I perceived the sociocultural environment to be hostile to me as an ESL learner who was still developing her communicative competence in English. In the same vein, when I eventually acquired this competence, it was made possible by a sociocultural environment which I perceived as friendly and supportive and hence conducive for practising this additional language.

THE CHALLENGE CONTINUES

My struggles regarding the use of English as a language of instruction and in everyday communication have not ended. Firstly, I am now living in another country where people pronounce English words differently. I am 'corrected' every now and then, in class during lectures and in conversations with colleagues. The expression 'oh you mean …' is a response that I hear frequently. This happens because the other person has failed to hear what I am saying either because of my accent or because he/she feels that I am pronouncing the words incorrectly. What has changed is that these occurrences do not silence me anymore. I have learnt to acknowledge the correction and then continue with my lecture or conversation. Secondly, I have observed that some of the student teachers whom I teach experience language challenges similar to mine. For example, I have noticed that an inability to speak English is hindering some students' full participation in discussions during lectures and tutorials, and that lack of proficiency in the language of instruction is negatively impacting students' academic success in tests and examinations.

Some students neither ask nor answer questions during lectures or tutorials, but at the end of the class, these students come one by one to ask questions or to express their views to me about some of the issues that were raised in the lecture or tutorial. In some cases, if there are group discussion intervals during the lecture, they raise their hands for me to go and hear their views. The students do not hesitate to tell me that the reason they cannot ask questions during lectures is because of their imperfect English. When they come to me, they do not want even the person behind them to hear what they say, therefore they whisper. To me this behaviour shows that the lecture environment as a whole is not a friendly space for speaking English. However, since the students are not afraid to come to me, I feel that I have managed to make myself approachable and to create a non-threatening space in which they can express their views in their limited English without fear of humiliation. The experiences of these students suggest that a critique of tertiary institutions, made by Rose (1985) a generation ago, is still valid. He expressed concern that universities allow students 'entrance to the academy while in various symbolic ways, denying them full participation' (Rose 1985, 357).

Students' performance is sometimes affected by their poor linguistic competence. On one occasion, I included in an examination a question which read 'A leaf is the main organ for photosynthesis. Describe how it is adapted for this function'. After the exam, a student came straight to my office looking dejected and said 'Ma'am the exam was so hard. What do you mean when you say adapted?' When I marked the papers I noticed that a number of students did not attempt this question at all. Others attempted the question but their responses were way off the mark. I could not help thinking about the student who had come to my office. I realised that these students had not failed to answer the exam question because they did not know about leaf adaptations, but because they did not know the meaning of the word 'adapted'. During the term, the class had done a practical in which they had looked at the structure of leaves and related that structure to function. However, in that practical,

I had not used the word (adapt). This example, which is one of many that I can cite, shows that linguistic competence in English can be a key to academic success (Setati 2002).

DISCUSSION

This narrative is an account of how I have struggled throughout my academic journey due to limited communicative competence in English which was the result of several interrelated sociocultural factors. The first factor is similar to what (Sandel 2003) has called the home/school split. Two fields interplayed in my life, namely: the community in which I grew up and the school. The school was the field for using English and the home, in a rural area, was the field for using my home language. The norms and values that were expected in each field were different. When I was a small child, there was a high degree of fit between my habitus and the field (the rural community), but when I was a high school learner, there was no longer a fit, linguistically, between my habitus and field (school) and this mismatch between my home and my school negatively affected my development of communicative competence in English and muted my voice in the classroom.

The second factor that affected my English language development is what I perceived to be a series of hostile sociocultural environments. The first of these was the community in which my rural home was located. It was a 'hostile' environment because it did not afford me opportunities to practise either listening to or speaking English, which are widely acknowledged as central to second language acquisition. Speaking English was considered as disrespectful towards the elders and as showing off to one's peers, so I was denied a chance to practise my oral English. However, I understand why the elders in my community would not allow children to speak English. As argued by Paulston (1992, 5), 'Language does not exist in a vacuum, but is an integrated part of a specific culture from which it cannot be separated', and as argued by Smits and Güngüz-Hoşgör (2003), language is an essential element of the cultural heritage of a group and it aids in transmitting the group's identity to the next generation. So when a child or an adult learns a language, they are not just acquiring new knowledge and skills, they are also learning the culture of the language. Parents, teachers and teacher educators are faced with a major challenge. Competence in English offers possibilities to ESL for the acquisition of both symbolic and material resources that are likely to increase their cultural capital (Norton and Toohey 2011) within their country of residence and internationally (Morrison and Lui 2000). However, their home language(s) is(are) also an integral part of their identity and cultural heritage and a rich resource for creativity, and thus should not be marginalized. As a teacher educator, one possible strategy is to encourage students to use all of the languages in which they can communicate in order to work towards understanding key concepts in their academic subjects. However, while English remains the language of assessment they will need to be supported in moving from understanding concepts in these languages to expressing this understanding in English.

The second sociocultural environment that affected the development of my communicative competence in English was the high school I attended. Fellow learners laughed at my poor oral English and the teacher did not intervene to create a friendly learning environment for learners like me, who were labelled Strong Rural Background (SRBs) learners whose communicative competence was limited. In addition, some of our male classmates were unhappy about being in the same class as girls. They therefore treated us like outsiders who were invading their space and made the learning environment unfriendly for the girl child.

The third 'hostile' environment was that of my undergraduate studies in which I struggled to understand some lecturers' English accents. Obviously, this was not anyone's fault but it affected my academic performance. Poor CALP in the language of instruction also affected my success in assignments and practical sessions. Whilst I was able to deal with my limited CALP on my own, I suggest that lecturers and the university as a whole could have been more sensitive to my needs. For example, some form of 'sheltered English instruction' (http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/, 2), an instructional approach in which lecturers use 'clear, direct, simple English and a wide range of scaffolding strategies to communicate meaningful input in the content area', would have been useful to me. Courses that include content area-language tutoring in which students learn vocabulary related to a subject by using it frequently in a real academic context could also have helped. Such courses would however require an investment of time and money by the institution.

The fourth sociocultural environment positively affected my confidence and competence in using English. At the rural schools where I taught after completing my first degree, I was able to teach competently in English because the learners were interested in the knowledge that I had and this created a non-threatening environment and helped me to overcome my fears in the classroom. The last sociocultural environment which, like the rural schools above, positively affected my confidence in using English was the post-graduate learning environment which was conducive as the lecturer was accommodating and supportive of ESL students. This environment positively influenced the development of communicative competence in English and helped me to overcome my fear of speaking the language.

As can be seen from this discussion, sociocultural environments can either positively or negatively affect an individual's development of communicative competence in a language (English in my case) and confidence in using it for a range of purposes. Whilst the home environment develops and nurtures a person's habitus, the field can be a place in which habitus is reinforced or in which it is challenged if there is a mismatch between the two. When the habitus is congruent with the field, the person is able to participate more effectively and efficiently than when it is not.

At the School of Education at which I teach, all first-year students take a compulsory course titled *New Literacies for Teachers*, part of which focuses on the development of academic reading and writing in English. The school also has a Writing Centre whose consultants are available to assist all undergraduate and postgraduate students with academic writing. However, I argue that in addition

to this support, my colleagues and I need to assist students to develop discipline-specific communicative competence that will enable them to access the practices of specific subjects. As argued by Wellington and Osborne (2001), a language can only be learnt when opportunities are provided for practising it. Although they are arguing in the context of language in science, this applies to the learning of language in any discipline. Thus, teacher educators must provide opportunities for their students to develop communicative competence in this powerful language in a comfortable learning environment, without being stigmatised or humiliated. In my classes I attempt to create a safe space for those students who are ESL speakers so that they can interact in class with both their lecturer and fellow students without fear of being ridiculed or laughed at. In this space I also introduce students, to the specialised discourse of a discipline (genetics) which is likely to be new for all of them, including home language speakers of English.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have described the challenges that I faced as a result of being an ESL student, a high school biology teacher and a teacher educator. My experiences demonstrate that the ability to speak, read and write English in Zimbabwe and in South Africa constitutes linguistic capital. Those who do not possess this linguistic capital may have limited access to the country's desirable goods and positions. However, because language forms part of a group's cultural heritage and identity, a person's first language(s) is(are) very important and should be both recognised and nurtured, both inside and outside the classroom. At the same time, because English has become a powerful language locally and globally, every student must be given a chance to become proficient in it in order to maximise their opportunities in life (Granville et al 1998). Many students whose first language is not English get to tertiary institutions without having become socially or academically competent in a language that is becoming increasingly dominant at South African universities. Therefore, at these institutions lecturers need to teach and to design learning activities in ways that lower students' anxiety about communicating in English (Krashen 1978) inside and outside the classroom, so that they have a strong voice in this language, while also supporting their acquisition of the disciplinary knowledge and skills (which for some students may involve drawing on several of the languages that they know) necessary for success in their studies and subsequent careers.

NOTE

1. I use the term English second language here deliberately because my home language is Shona and I had to learn English as a second language because it is the language of instruction in schools in Zimbabwe.

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