

This is a transcript for Lingthusiasm Bonus Episode 37: Teaching linguistics to yourself and other people. It's been lightly edited for readability. Listen to the episode [here](#). Links to studies mentioned and further reading can also be found on the [show page](#).

[Music]

Lauren: Welcome to Lingthusiasm, a podcast that's enthusiastic about linguistics! I'm Lauren Gawne.

Gretchen: I'm Gretchen McCulloch. In this 37th Patreon bonus episode, we get enthusiastic about teaching and self-teaching linguistics. But first, the LingComm grant is now public.

Lauren: It has been really exciting to see the response so far. We were excited to share it with you early. We're now excited to share it with everyone. We're looking forward to seeing great applications for new linguistics communication projects.

Gretchen: Yes! You can help support the grant by sharing it with people who might have an interesting project to apply for and help us meet the goal to give out three grants.

Lauren: If we get to 800 patrons by the first of May, we will be able to give out three grants, which is three times the amount of linguistics communication excellence.

Gretchen: So exciting! I'm really excited to see everything as it's coming in.

Lauren: For more information about the grants, how to apply, and how to help support us in creating more linguistics communication in the world, go to lingcomm.org.

Gretchen: That's "LingComm" with two Ms, as in "communication."

[Music]

Lauren: Gretchen, I am so excited. This year I get to teach our Introduction to Linguistics courses at my day job at La Trobe.

Gretchen: That is so exciting. Are you dusting off your syllabi?

Lauren: Our first semester kicks off at the beginning of March. Our second semester is in September. It's gonna be a whole year of being really enthusiastic at intro students. I'm very excited.

Gretchen: I am also excited about intro because we've been working together on coming up with a syllabus and the scripts for the Linguistics Crash Course series. This is a great chance for us to talk about how we approach the idea of introducing someone to linguistics and how you can approach it if you're trying to teach other people about your enthusiasm for linguistics or get more out of the resources you may be encountering online.

Lauren: I love thinking about pedagogy. I think there's lots of really good opportunities for linguists whether you teach linguistics content to high school students or university students or in a popular

linguistics format. There's lots of really good conversations that I know you and I have had, and I enjoy having with other colleagues, about how to do this thoughtfully.

Gretchen: I think it's something that people don't get as much training on as they could. Sometimes, people are the unfortunate victim of a linguistics class that may not be as well structured as it could be or may not be presenting things in the most engaging way because academia doesn't really train you for effective teaching and that's a shame. It's nice to be able to compile some of the things that we've learned in a place where they might be useful for people who are getting started teaching.

Lauren: I have multiple high school teachers in my family, and so I always am very keenly aware of just how much training people get to teach children all the way up until they finish high school. Then, it's very possible that your Intro to Linguistics teacher has had maybe a two-hour seminar on how to teach and has done the rest by training. That's not to say that there aren't amazing intro lecturers – I have been fortunate enough to have them as my teachers or to work with them – but we don't always receive the same amount of training or thinking overtly about this.

Gretchen: When I first was a teaching assistant for Intro to Linguistics, my training was a one-hour meeting with the prof and the other TAs. Then, I sat in on one other TA's tutorial to watch what she did. Then, I was running them.

Lauren: Look at that. After that, you've done absolutely no good linguistics pedagogy. Nothing!

Gretchen: I'm terrible at it! I don't even run a podcast or anything. I mean, I was also coming to it from several years of tutoring both Intro to Linguistics and whole bunch of other projects because that was one of the part-time jobs that I had in high school and in university. I was coming to it with a certain understanding of which things people find difficult or hard to explain and what makes for a good explanation. But it was a lot of teaching on the job, and I think it's a shame that I was able to dive into this research and dive into how people actually do this at a later date.

Lauren: Let's just get straight to the heart of the matter with a topic like linguistics, because it's something we always have to grapple with, which is dealing with terminology.

Gretchen: Terminology is huge.

Lauren: Because it's very tempting to just sit here and teach terminology for the sake of it.

Gretchen: I think when you're putting together a syllabus or a guide for how people are learning something, it's easy to say, "Okay. We're gonna cover Topic X, Topic Y, and Topic Z." Those are the names that you have for those topics because you're an expert on this and that's why you're covering it. But walking into a class and saying, "Today, class, we're gonna learn about" – the example I always use is "existentialism" because, I dunno, I liked my high school English classes, but when we were first introduced to "Today, class, we're gonna learn about existentialism," and you're thinking, "Okay. Great. Why am I supposed to care about this?" and then the teacher will say something like, "Existentialism was developed by Camus and other French philosophers in the," I dunno, "1800s" – I clearly don't remember this – "They thought a lot about this," and you're like, "I still don't know what existentialism is or why I should care about it. I've just found out who the

people were that developed it.” But if I don’t know who those people are in the first place, that’s not actually interesting – that’s not actually the thing that’s grabbing my attention. Instead, imagine if I’m going into this classroom and the instructor says, “Have you ever thought about the fact that one day you’re gonna die?” And you’re like, “Whoa! Oh no. This is terrifying. What have I done here?” And “There were some people who thought about dying a lot, a hundred years ago or so. They were called existentialists. Here’s what they thought about this.” This links it to a question that is very direct, unfortunately, to every aspect of the human experience of something that you have thought about and then says, “Here’s this thing that’s interesting, that’s relatable, and now we have a word for it.” Whereas, when you’re teaching, you might say, “Here’s existentialism.” I picked that as an example because it’s not in linguistics so it’s something that maybe more people have had an experience of trying to be introduced to. If you’re teaching and you’re writing a lesson plan for yourself, your lesson plan probably says, “Today, we’re gonna introduce the class to existentialism.”

Lauren: I think at an even more removed level because it’s very tempting – and when I write down syllabi, I’m like, “Today in phonetics, we’re gonna learn place of articulation and manner of articulation.” There are a dozen options for manner of articulation and a dozen options for place of articulation. You have this giant grid of terminology. Actually, what I want to teach is the concept that there are different places of articulation and different manners – different places you can put your tongue in your mouth to make sounds and different ways of moving your mouth to make sounds. It’s very tempting to be like, “I just need them to learn these 50 bits of jargon,” but actually I’d rather someone come out of their linguistics degree just knowing that there’s that variation in how sounds are produced and how consonants are produced than knowing all of the specific names. I think sometimes it can be very, like, “I must know all the terminology or I’m not a linguist.”

Gretchen: It’s very easy to get caught up in the flashcard aspect to it of like, “Okay. Well, here are all these bits of terminology.” One thing that we do in these episodes is we use, max, one, maybe two new pieces of terminology per half-hour episode. That seems like it’s not very much. That’s deliberate because people probably can’t remember more than one or two pieces of terminology in a half-hour anyway. If we don’t choose which bits they’re gonna remember, then they’re gonna be left to the random whims – or the fallibility – of human memory. We’d rather pick which things people are gonna remember. In a classroom with a lecture, you don’t have that luxury. You need to introduce a whole bunch of pieces of terminology and then you need people to go home and make flashcards and things like that. But you can still lead with the concept aspect of it and introduce the terminology once you’ve justified the existence.

Lauren: If you are a very attentive listener to the structure of, especially, really content-heavy Lingthusiasm episodes now, you’ll really hear – you’re like, “Uh, that is the piece of terminology they have decided to introduce this episode. It’s come after a very elaborate description of what it is.”

Gretchen: The example that I like to pair with the existentialism example is – you remember, Lauren, when you learned the word “schadenfreude”?

Lauren: I feel like I was probably somewhere in high school and I took great delight in it.

Gretchen: Right. You’re like, “Wow! There’s a word for this! It’s so exciting there’s this word for taking pleasure in people’s misfortune. I’m not uniquely terrible. Someone else has also had this

feeling, and this is something that other people have gone to the trouble of naming that it's this very All Things Linguistic thing that there's a name for." It's satisfying because it's something we were already familiar with the concept. Or a word like "petrichor," which is the word for the smell of dry land when it just started raining, which again is this beautiful word because it names this concept that we're already deeply familiar with. People find it really satisfying to learn words when they already understand the concept. They find it difficult, and confusing, and pointless to learn words when they don't know what it refers to yet or they don't have any understanding of the concept it refers to yet.

Lauren: I always like contrasting my experience of learning terminology in linguistics, which was very like, "Okay. Phonetics. Here are all the phonetics terms you need and all the symbols. Go, go, go!" Then, in art history, which was my other major, you would look at a painting and then the lecturer would say, "This painting is" – I remember learning words like "juxtapose" or "pastiche." Because you were looking at something, and you could see what was happening, getting the terminology to help you articulate that was really satisfying. It's something that really influenced how I try and teach linguistics.

Gretchen: I think the classic thing to do in an intro phonetics class or intro phonetics lecture is something like having the students, like, "Okay, everybody, make the S sound. Make /s/." You have them alternate between /s/, /ʃ/, /s/, /ʃ/ – you can do it right now, while you're listening – and say, "Okay. Feel what your tongue is doing when you're going between these sounds." You can sit there and be paying attention to the inside of your own mouth, and that's where I'd say, "Now, we need a name for these two different places in your mouth because clearly, if you move your tongue from one to the other, you create what we feel like is a different sound." This phrase, "concept first, jargon second," actually comes from a study about teaching which is in the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. It's not a linguistics journal, but it is a study. They had students in a large undergrad biology course who half of them got traditional sorts of readings which give you the jargon and the vocabulary and so on as something, you know, "The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, and the ribosomes do this, and the nucleus does this." Then, the other half in a different section, same instructor, got a pre-class reading that had the concepts, so "There's a part of the cell that does this. There's a part of the cell that does that" without the terminology attached to it. Then, in class, that second group got, "Okay. This part that you learned as the powerhouse of the cell is called the 'mitochondria'," and so on and so forth. That second group that got the concepts before they were exposed to the jargon did better in the post test – the same test as both groups did – just because they'd gotten exposed to the concept before they'd gotten exposed to the jargon. This really made me think of, how can we do this whether in a pedagogical context or in a – not even necessarily in a formal classroom – but just in an informal explanation? If you listen to a Lingthusiasm episode that's about – you know, the one we did the verb is the coat rack that the rest of the sentence hangs on, which talks about all these concepts with respect to the verb, then you go read the associated Wikipedia article that actually uses all of this terminology, it can be easier to understand that Wikipedia article because the concepts are now familiar to you and you can slot in the jargon into this understanding that you have. Whereas, if you start with the Wikipedia article that has all this terminology because it exists, then it can be hard to wrap your brain around the concepts at the same time as you're trying to hold onto these new words.

Lauren: Of course, the extra satisfying thing is you just taught people the concept of concept-first, jargon second by bringing in the concept and then giving them the phrase “concept first, jargon second,” which leads into another thing that I find really satisfying in a well-constructed linguistics class which is just getting into more data. The more data that you can get your hands on, the more you can pull apart morphology puzzles or syntax puzzles or do text analysis or listen to recordings and do conversation analysis transcripts. Whatever the area of linguistic study is, the more data you can play around with, the more familiar concepts become.

Gretchen: This relates to a piece that people often ask me of like, “Will linguistics make me better at learning another language or should I learn languages first?” We often don’t necessarily have the choice of which types of classes are available for you to take. Many people are able to take language classes in high school and not able to take linguistics classes there. What I found when I was teaching intro linguistics was that the students who had only even been exposed to one language, English – because that was the language of instruction but it would be true for any one language you’ve been exposed to – often had a harder time with the class than students that had been exposed to any other language for some significant capacity because it blows your mind as to what’s even possible when it comes to a language. The more languages someone had been exposed to, the more they were able to say, when they got into the linguistics class, “Oh, here’s this name for this phenomenon that I’ve encountered in some other language that I have some awareness of!” The data’s really relevant to – it’s another way of saying it’s easier when you get exposed to the concept first.

Lauren: For me, they’re very mutually reinforcing. Obviously, learning linguistics is how I was able to write a grammar of Lamjung Yolmo as part of my fieldwork because it gave me the terminology and the structures to do that analysis, but there’re also parts of linguistics that I only remember by thinking about those examples in Yolmo. They’re definitely mutually beneficial. One of the great things about studying linguistics as opposed to studying particle physics is that time on an accelerometer is very expensive, but there is a lot of language just floating around.

Gretchen: Some of the basic stuff of like “Where is S versus /ʃ/ produced in the mouth?” – that’s free. You could just move your tongue and there it is. Now, you’ve experienced it and you didn’t need to buy a microscope, or you didn’t need to buy hours on the large hydron collider or something like this.

Lauren: You can always figure out on campus who’s doing a phonetics course at any time because they’re the people walking around going /ijuuu iii jæææ/ and making their mouth help them think about sounds and how they’re made.

Gretchen: I think it’s a rite of passage to be making sounds in a bus or a library or something and be like, “Are people looking at me? I’m making these weird sounds because I’m just trying to figure out how my mouth is working.” When you were introducing me to the gesture literature, which was much more recently than when I took intro linguistics, I was also sitting there at cafes being like, “So, if I move my hand like this, and then if I move my hand like that,” and “I wonder what happens?” looking over at other people in the café being like, “What are they doing with their hands while they’re talking?”

Lauren: I love it when students in whatever class I'm teaching come back with little morsels that they found in the world. If real world observation isn't giving you enough structure, if you're specifically looking for morphology or syntax puzzles, you can find old linguistics textbooks really cheap. There's a lot of class data sets that get circulated online that no one can use for assignments anymore because they've been out in the wild for so long. There's always more data if you feel like your textbook and your class aren't giving you enough to work with.

Gretchen: The Linguistics Olympiad puzzles are really good too – the International Linguistics Olympiad and many of the different national ones like NACLO and OzCLO and UKLO – /juklou/. I dunno how you say the UK one. A lot of them put their puzzles up from previous years, and sometimes the solutions, online. That can be a source of – they treat linguistics language data as a way of doing logic puzzles because they don't want to assume any previous knowledge of linguistics, but they often have various sources of data for that too. I think there's also something to be said for getting your own data. Ask your roommate a couple questions, or do a bit of a survey of a few of your friends on social media, or talk about what the slang is that people your age are doing these days, or what the local dialect is like, or how your parents are talking – look in your own life and see if there are things you could understand differently through linguistics ideas.

Lauren: Getting embedded in data and getting your hands dirty, so to speak, in a linguistic analysis sense is zooming right into the “doing linguistics.” Another thing I find really satisfying is zooming right out to the big picture and really explaining why the thing that people are doing is relevant to their lives – either their lives now or career aspirations that they have – because I love doing linguistics and there is definitely a genre of person who does linguistics just because they think it's really cool, and that's great, and I'm always happy to cater to those people. But a lot of people don't know that they should think linguistics is cool yet.

Gretchen: It can be nice to have, “Okay. Here's a more practical outcome of something that you wanna try to do.” Lauren, I know you do a lot of interviews on your blog about different kinds of interesting jobs that people have done with a linguistics degree or two and some of the ways in which the linguistics training has applied to that.

Lauren: I think of this as really important PR for linguistics because people come to university – if they think they wanna be a lawyer, they know they should study law or if they want to be a teacher, they study teaching. People don't always know that linguistics could be a really good thing to study for a whole variety of careers, which I've seen.

Gretchen: I think it's really hard for the jobs that aren't your Sesame Street jobs. You know, like, “Oh, you wanna be a firefighter or you wanna be a teacher, you wanna build houses or be a ballerina” or something. There's a few of those jobs that everyone's heard of, and then there's a whole bunch of other jobs that are probably the majority of the jobs that people haven't heard of from Sesame Street that are often very interesting and satisfying and we can't all be firefighters but I think that the linguistics jobs series is really helpful for.

Lauren: In a really nice full-circle outcome for those interviews, there's a new linguistics textbook by Stebbins and Burridge called *For the Love of Language* that features snippets from a whole bunch of those interviews from Superlinguo.

Gretchen: Fantastic! That's really exciting. You're getting to influence textbooks directly.

Lauren: This textbook is taking the same approach that I take that it's really good to explain to students why linguistics is relevant while they're studying it.

Gretchen: I also think it's good to even explain at a certain macrolevel what is useful about this particular piece of information because there're certain types of topics that get covered to death in intro linguistics courses because they're so ubiquitous and so useful. Things like, "Oh, you need to learn the International Phonetic Alphabet" or "Oh, you need to learn how to draw trees." It's because they're very useful topics, but especially when you start out teaching or if you haven't thought as much about teaching, it's easy to be like, "Oh, well, I'm covering this because that's just what you have to do in an intro linguistics course," and if you don't, then when you take another later course or something, people will think it's weird if you don't cover it. That's true too. There are fads in pedagogy. But what I think is the interesting bit to explain to students or to keep in mind as you're doing this is the bigger picture reason for, like, if the IPA didn't exist, we would have to invent it because it's just really useful to have a common way of talking about all of the different sounds in the different spoken languages. It's useful to have a common vocabulary for that and a common set of symbols to use for that because that way, if you're being exposed to a new language or if you're trying to describe the difference between one dialect and another dialect, or between one person's saying of a word and another person's saying of a word, you have a set of tools to do that with.

Lauren: It would be so hard to program our voice to text and our text to voice apps that we use all the time. The IPA make a speech pathologist's life really easy. Opera singers use it. Opera singers don't always necessarily speak 17th century German and 18th century Italian. They use the IPA to read those opera lyrics.

Gretchen: I've heard from a lot of people in choirs and stuff that if you're singing something in another language – sometimes choirs will also do like, "Oh, here's a folk song in Estonian or something that we wanna sing. Do we know Estonian? No. But we have it in the International Phonetic Alphabet."

Lauren: It's also really great, as I'm sure we've talked about before somewhere, that you can write down anyone's name the way they would actually prefer you to pronounce it. It's like a superpower.

Gretchen: Yes! I love doing this when I'm introduced to somebody. I'm like, "Oh, I'm just gonna write their name down in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Now, I can say it back to them the way they say it, and I'm gonna remember it forever, and I'm not gonna forget in six months like, 'What did I mean by this sequence of ad hoc symbols?'" You can also use it to write your own name on your website if you want people to say it correctly. There're a bunch of people in the Lingthusiasm Discord that have put in their username, like, their username and then their username as pronounced in IPA. So, now I'm pronouncing everyone's username correctly and that's delightful.

Lauren: So great.

Gretchen: Very nerdy.

Lauren: This is why I love teaching. I always think of it as just the “why” of linguistics. Why are we doing this? Why have you bothered to come to class? Why am I still here teaching it? There’re lots of reasons why, and it’s good to highlight some of those.

Gretchen: The same for something like, “Oh, you need to learn how to draw some trees.” It can be easy to say, “Trees are an end in themselves because lots of linguists draw trees. If you wanna become a syntactician, you need to draw some trees.” But thinking about it as, it’s useful to be able to talk about all the different relationships that different words and pieces of words have to each other in a given utterance, to be able to talk about all those different relationships and roles very precisely, it’s useful to have some common terminology and to have an understanding of what the basic and uncontroversial sentences are doing so that when it comes to ones that are really interesting edge cases, we have a certain basic set of things that we already know that we can figure out. That’s an insight to why talk about syntax trees or why talk about phonetic transcription.

Lauren: That insight gets to apply to so many domains. When they were building search engines that take natural language queries – the fact that you can just type in sentences and Google can understand it is because, in the early days, people built a lot of syntax trees to do that. Or if you understand how syntax trees work, and you understand what’s happening with syntactic ambiguity, that’s relevant to some areas of the law that have maybe not been written as well as they could be.

Gretchen: Or maybe have gotten wilfully reinterpreted in later generations in hopes that maybe something else could happen.

Lauren: I always like trying to find these relevant – not every example is gonna be relevant to everyone – but trying to find ways to connect the specific content that people are learning with a variety of careers and not just doing linguistics to be a linguist but doing linguistics to be a linguist in a whole variety of different fields.

Gretchen: I think there’s also the wonderment aspect of it. I think sometimes we underestimate the importance of awe when it comes to people’s motivations for learning about science or about the world around us of like – it was really satisfying when I learned how to stargaze because then I could up at the night sky and, instead of seeing like, “Oh, here are a bunch of nice stars,” which is nice, I could say, “Oh, here’s this particular group. I know that Orion was over here last time I looked at it, and now it’s here, and that’s because it’s a different time of the night.” I can tell time by the sky now, which is really cool. It’s a similar kind of coolness is like, “Oh, I can actually identify the specific features of this person’s dialect versus that person’s dialect” because it’s not just this murky morass of opinions and impressions, there’s actually stuff there that people have already catalogued and figured out. When I have an understanding of the whole category, then I can understand the specific, unique version that I’m being presented with right now. I can put it in a bigger context.

Lauren: I am definitely, personally, happy to say that it was a large chunk of awe and amazement from my undergrad professors that have made me still so keen and make me love teaching intro as well because I wanna pay that excitement forward.

Gretchen: I had a really exciting Sherlock Holmes moment when I was in linguistics grad school where I met some person at a party and I was able to identify like, “Oh, you’re a Montrealer whose parents are from northern England” based on how he said one word. He was like, “Oh my god! How did you do this?” And I was like, “Oh, well, it’s because of these four things.” I felt like Sherlock Holmes. I’ve never felt more like Sherlock Holmes in my life.

Lauren: Linguistics superpowers. This is what we should be marketing to people.

Gretchen: Linguistics jobs – consulting detective.

Lauren: Final tips for teaching or learning linguistics for those who are starting in the next few months?

Gretchen: My biggest slightly out-there pro tip is don’t practice the International Phonetic Alphabet in a whisper or under your breath because what that means is that you’re not vibrating your vocal cords. Because, as somebody who was self-teaching linguistics for quite a few years before I ended up at university and I was trying to feel the difference between the two different sounds that we represent with a TH diagraph in English, and I was like, “But there’s a ‘the’ and a ‘thing,’” and I was whispering, I’m like, “the, thing,” and I was trying to put my hand on my throat and I couldn’t feel the difference. I was like, “This is so difficult. What’s going on?” because I was self-conscious that people would hear me. It turns out that what you’re doing when you’re whispering is not vibrating your vocal cords. If you’re trying to distinguish between sounds that rely on vibration or not of your vocal cords, and you’re whispering, you’ve just destroyed that entire distinction. Just find a quiet place where no one’s gonna overhear you or decide you don’t care that people are gonna overhear you and actually just practice at full volume because it’ll be so much easier for you.

Lauren: So much easier. My advice is just to have multiple coloured pens – whether you’re a prof, make sure you have a bunch of different coloured whiteboard markers or, if you’re a student, have different coloured pens because what you’re generally doing in any intro class is learning about different structures or different categories and I, personally, mentally like doing that by colour-coding.

Gretchen: I definitely did this too. There was a student that I was tutoring, and I had every single coloured pen in my bag – pulling out to map on these two different sets of things to each other. I think it was really helpful. Lauren, I can’t believe we didn’t say the most obvious tip, which is in the tagline of our podcast.

Lauren: Yeah. I think that whatever you’re teaching or whatever you’re learning, the most important thing is to have fun and stay lingthusiastic.

[Music]

Lauren: For more Lingthusiasm, and links to everything mentioned in this episode, go to patreon.com/lingthusiasm. I tweet and blog as Superlinguo.

Gretchen: I can be found as @GretchenAMcC on twitter, my blog is AllThingsLinguistic.com, and my book is *Because Internet*. Lingthusiasm is created and produced by Gretchen McCulloch and Lauren Gawne. Our senior producer is Claire Gawne, our production editor is Sarah Dopierala, and our music is Ancient City by The Triangles.

Lauren: Thank you so much for being a patron.

Gretchen: Stay lingthusiastic!

[Music]



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