

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie

From taxis to classrooms in Khayelitsha. The researcher as a learner

Hallitzky, Maria [Hrsg.]; Mulhanga, Félix [Hrsg.]; Spendrin, Karla [Hrsg.]; Yoshida, Nariakira [Hrsg.]:
*Expanding horizons and local connectedness. Challenges for qualitative teaching research and
development in intercultural contexts. Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2025, S. 107-123*



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie: From taxis to classrooms in Khayelitsha. The researcher as a learner -
In: Hallitzky, Maria [Hrsg.]; Mulhanga, Félix [Hrsg.]; Spendrin, Karla [Hrsg.]; Yoshida, Nariakira [Hrsg.]:
*Expanding horizons and local connectedness. Challenges for qualitative teaching research and
development in intercultural contexts. Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2025, S. 107-123* - URN:
urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-341870 - DOI: 10.25656/01:34187; 10.35468/6193-10

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-341870>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:34187>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.klinkhardt.de>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk
bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen,
solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm
festgelegten Weise nennen und das Werk bzw. diesen Inhalt nicht bearbeiten,
abwandeln oder in anderer Weise verändern.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die
Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-License:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy,
distribute and transmit, adapt or exhibit the work in the public as long as you
attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor. You are
not allowed to alter or transform this work or its contents at all.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of
use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

From Taxis to Classrooms in Khayelitsha: The Researcher as a Learner¹

Abstracts

EN

South African township schools are highly sensitive settings where researchers can easily invoke associations of officialdom, creating anxiety amongst teachers who fear that their classroom practices could be reported back to educational authorities. From taxis to classrooms is an account of how I needed to negotiate a complex assemblage of practices, vehicles, people, anxieties, highways and histories until I eventually gained access to classrooms. I describe how, by taking informal public transport (mini-bus taxis) to, and engaging in language learning at the school, I forged a learner-researcher identity for myself that broadened my horizon and also helped me to gradually gain the participants' trust. Abstracting from this particular case, I argue for the importance of immersing oneself in the context of a research location in such a way that it creates common experiences between researchers and participants with their otherwise very different life worlds. I end with a critical note on the term 'teaching research' in international contexts. Much of the essential work in such international research encounters outside the well-researched mainstream happens outside of classrooms. I suggest that to really broaden our horizons and to take our dependency on the particular research location seriously, we should make time for school-based ethnographies instead of trying to head straight for classrooms.

DE

Südafrikanische Township Schulen sind sensible Forschungsfelder. Forscher:innen sind hier ungewöhnlich und werden leicht als bedrohlich ein-

1 Parts of this chapter are based on a methodological subchapter with the title 'From taxis to classrooms' in my monograph Krause, 2021. The version at hand, however, has been substantially extended and substantial changes and adaptations have been made to focus much more on the researcher as a learner in cross-cultural classroom research.

gestuft, weil sie Informationen über Unterrichtspraktiken an Autoritäten weiterleiten könnten. Dieses Kapitel erzählt die Geschichte davon, wie ich Zugang zu so einer Schule bekommen habe. *From Taxis to Classrooms* zeigt, wie ich mich in einer komplexen Assemblage aus Praktiken, Fahrzeugen, Menschen, Ängsten, Highways und südafrikanischer Geschichte zurechtfinden musste, um letztendlich Zugang zu Klassenräumen zu bekommen. Es wird beschrieben wie meine Nutzung öffentlicher Verkehrsmittel (Minibus Taxis) und das Lernen der lokalen Sprache im Feld meinen Horizont erweitert und mir Schritt für Schritt das Vertrauen der Lehrer:innen eingebracht hat. Von diesem Fall abstrahierend argumentiere ich, dass Forscher:innen Wege finden müssen, in die lokalen Realitäten in und um ihr Forschungsfeld herum einzutauchen. Dies resultiert in geteilten Erfahrungen zwischen Forschungsteilnehmer:innen und Forscher:innen mit ansonsten sehr unterschiedlichen Lebenswelten, die dabei helfen, Vertrauen aufzubauen. Am Ende des Artikels steht eine kritische Bemerkung zum Begriff ‚Unterrichtsforschung‘ in internationalen Kontexten. Ein Großteil der essentiellen Arbeit in solchen Begegnungen, wenn sie nicht im bereits gut erforschten Mainstream stattfinden, geschieht außerhalb der Klassenräume. Wenn wir unsere Horizonte erweitern und unsere Abhängigkeit von spezifischen lokalen Realitäten ernst nehmen wollen, erscheint es angebrachter, umfassendere, schulbasierte Ethnografien anzustreben, anstatt direkt den Unterricht anzuvizieren.

PT

As escolas das townships sul-africanas são áreas de investigação sensíveis. Os investigadores não são frequentes neste tipo de escolas e são facilmente classificados como ameaçadores, porque poderiam transmitir às autoridades informações sobre as práticas de ensino. Este capítulo conta a história de como obtive acesso a uma dessas escolas. Dos táxis às salas de aula mostra como tive de navegar num conjunto complexo de práticas, veículos, pessoas, medos, auto-estradas e história sul-africana para finalmente ter acesso às salas de aula. Descreve como a minha utilização de transportes públicos (táxis minibus) e a aprendizagem da língua local no terreno alargaram os meus horizontes e me fizeram ganhar gradualmente a confiança dos professores. Abstraindo deste caso, defendo que os investigadores precisam de encontrar formas de mergulhar nas realidades locais dentro e à volta do seu campo de investigação. Isto resulta em experiências partilhadas entre os participantes na investigação e os investigadores de mundos de vida muito diferentes o que ajuda a criar confiança. No final do artigo, há um comentário crítico sobre o termo “investigação na sala de aula” em contextos internacionais. Grande parte do trabalho essencial em tais encontros, quan-

do não tem lugar na corrente dominante já bem investigada, acontece fora da sala de aula. Se quisermos alargar os nossos horizontes e levar a sério a nossa dependência de realidades locais específicas, parece mais apropriado visar etnografias mais amplas, baseadas na escola, em vez de visar diretamente a sala de aula.

JA

南アフリカの黒人居住区の学校は、慎重な取り扱いを要する研究フィールドである。研究者は学校にとってなじみのない存在であり、即座に危険視される。これは、研究者が授業実践についての情報を当局に提出する可能性があることに由来する。タクシーから教室へ—これは、実践、乗り物、人びと、懸念、高速道路、そして歴史といった複雑な混淆状況に対し、わたしがいかに交渉せねばならなかったかという物語である。このあとにやっと、わたしは教室にたどり着くことができたのである。インフォーマルな乗合いの移動手段(ミニバス・タクシー)を用い、学校での言語学習に参加しながら、どのようにしてわたしが学習者としての研究者というアイデンティティを次第に忘れていったのかを描写する。このアイデンティティは、わたしの地平を広げ、実践家の信頼をじよじよに勝ち取ってゆく助けとなった。この事例から、研究者が自分自身を研究対象となる現場の文脈に溶け込ませることの意義を論じる。そこでは、まったく異なる生活世界をもつ研究者と現場に加わっている人びととのあいだに、共通の経験を生み出すという方法がとられる。本稿は、国際的な文脈での「教授研究」という概念に対するわたしの批判的註釈で締めくくられる。このような国際的な研究活動のなかの本質的な作業の多くは、手厚い研究がおこなわれる主流から外れたところで、そして多くは教室の外で展開している。わたしたちの地平を真に広げ、特定の研究対象となる現場に依存していることを重要な問題としてとらえるために、授業に直接向かうのではなく、学校に拠点を置きながらも幅広さをもつエスノグラフィに時間をかけるべきことを提唱したい。

1 From expert to learner by taxi

1.1 Beginning to know that I don't know

“Go to the Cape Town taxi rank, find the lane towards Khayelitsha, ask whether the taxi is going to ‘Side B’; if so, get on. When you get to Khayelitsha, tell the driver you need to go to Highschool A and then I will pick you up there” (Khayelitsha resident, cited in Krause 2021: 49).

That’s how I was going to get to Khayelitsha, short for ‘ikhaya elitsha’, Xhosa for ‘new home’. Built in the 1980s about 30km outside of Cape Town’s city cen-

tre it is South Africa's second largest township. In the words of Aslam Fataar, Khayelitsha was built under apartheid

"for those blacks who were regarded as superfluous to the cultural, political and economic logics of urban apartheid planners, whose inhabitants were only required for menial work and cheap labour" (Fataar 2009: 11).

Apartheid died, Khayelitsha lives on. Today, with an estimated 1,2 to 2 million inhabitants, it's one of the markers of Cape Town's persistent residential segregation. Somewhere in Khayelitsha was the school where I wanted to do research. Classroom research. So following my informant's directions, I went to the taxi rank, an impressive construction on top of Cape Town's railway station, a vibey place with formal and informal shops and blasting music. It is also a place carefully avoided by most middle-class South Africans, because it counts as informal and prone to crime and violence. I knew the place. I knew Cape Town well. I had stayed here for a few months some years ago. I had taken taxis before. I knew my way around these parts. I was an expert – or so I thought.

I found the line to Khayelitsha. My Xhosa language skills were rudimentary but I could greet and ask where the taxi was going. A bulky man tells me that it is going via Side B, but not without a startled look on his face. Why would a White² girl go to Khayelitsha? Also, why by taxi? Most passengers seemed to ask themselves that, judging by how they eyed me. Minibus taxis constitute a largely unregulated, highly flexible and efficient transport industry, used almost exclusively by the working-class that often lives in townships and works in the city (Clark & Crous 2002). This part of the population, as a remnant of apartheid racial segregation, is in turn Black or Coloured, not White like me. Once seated, neighbouring passengers asked me why I was going to Khayelitsha, what I was doing there, where I was from, etc. I was an object of curiosity, a White body in a Black space, as I realised now. That body made me visible where I wanted to be inconspicuous. It made me insecure where I wanted to play it cool. While I was feeling these feelings and thinking these thoughts, the taxi began to move.

From the rank on top of the city the driver went straight onto the N2 highway. Yes, I had indeed taken taxis before, but only through Cape Town's immediate suburbs – not those that take the highway out to the townships. I noticed that there was no 'conductor'. As D'hondt (2009) finds for taxis in Dar es Salaam

2 Terms like 'Black', 'Coloured' and 'White' reflect local language use with reference to South Africa's different population groups. A remnant of apartheid that is, however, also used for affirmative action today (Posel 2001). I use such terms without racist intention. 'Black' is used for persons of African descent, 'Coloured' for persons of KhoiSan or Cape Malay descent or mixed race, and 'White' indicates European descent.

(which, in my experience, operate similarly to Cape Town taxis), the conductor's presence and his verbal and non-verbal communication with passengers and the driver make the taxi run smoothly. "His job consists of 'collecting' information from the passengers about where they want to be dropped off and 'transmitting' that information to the driver" (D'hondt 2009: 1966). He also collects fares and operates the door. I was used to this type of taxiing – the conductor-mediated type.

Now there was no mediator between us passengers and the driver. I wondered how the fare collection would work without a mediator and also, once in Khayelitsha, how would we know where to get off? Thoughts that made me anxious. I thought I knew how to taxi. Turns out I had no clue. Not around these parts. I would have to rely on other people. I was not only visible but now I felt visibly lost, visibly clueless, no longer expert-like but more like an idiot.

Meanwhile, the driver moves the taxi swiftly and quickly along the N2 highway towards Khayelitsha. Twidle (2017), in his walking ethnography of the N2, describes this highway as "a corridor of motorist anxiety and middle-class paranoia" (Twidle 2017: 66). While it is easy for middle-class South Africans to avoid going into the townships, the highway cannot be avoided so easily. It connects too much. It links the residential and more industrial suburbs to the city, takes you to the airport or straight to your coastal holiday domicile. Or to Khayelitsha. The N2, Twidle writes, is "a space where we are all in it together – though not, of course, all in the same way" (ibid.: 63).

Indeed it makes a difference whether you ride in your private car and complain about these "reckless taxi drivers" (Ramphela 2018) or if you are in the taxi yourself, relying on that driver to get you where you need to be, preferably alive. Inevitably, you see the journey differently. Trusting the driver with your life, in the same 15 seater – with a little creativity one can make that 18 – like everyone else, makes it harder to tell yourself how 'useless' he is. High horses aren't easily ridden around these parts. If only to put myself at ease, I began noticing the skills of the driver. He makes his living by being faster than his colleagues, knows his routes like the palm of his hand and certainly has an interest in getting home alive, too. So who knows, maybe he is a better driver than anybody else on the road. Possible. Anyways, I had no choice but to rely on his expertise, because I didn't have any.

Because there are no maps of the routes and no officially designated stops, D'hondt observes how passengers on a taxi are oriented towards as able to infer autonomously where they are and what is an accepted stop "on the basis of their familiarity with this form of transport" (2009: 1973). Clearly, I was not as familiar with this form of transport as I thought, as I got a fright when the driver pulled over to the side of the highway shortly before the turn-off to

Khayelitsha and, magically it seemed to me, some people got off while others remained seated. Nothing was wrong with the taxi and not everybody got off. Why? What was going on? What had I missed?

Thinking back, shortly before the driver stopped there was an exchange between him and the passengers where he asked something in Xhosa and some people, not all, raised their hands in response. I missed that. "Mutual monitoring" (D'hondt 2009: 1968), something every taxi passenger needs to engage in, happened without me. Reading the startled look on my face my seat neighbour asked me: "Are you going to Side B?" I affirmed. "Then get off and get on the other taxi", she said. This confirmed everybody's suspicion then I had no clue about how things worked here.

Indeed, another taxi stopped behind us on the highway. I got on. Having swapped taxis, the next problem was that the driver didn't know the landmark that I was supposed to give him according to my informant. It didn't count as a stop. Or maybe I pronounced it wrong. So instead of playing it cool at least in the second taxi I was outed again as 'umlungo olahlekileyo eKhayelitsha' (a White person lost in Khayelitsha), now having to pool all the expertise in this taxi to co-construct where I probably wanted to go. An attempt that was eventually successful. I made it to the school. Embarrassed, humbled and relieved, beginning to know that I knew nothing about the location of my research and how things worked here.

1.2 Taxiing my way in

"How did you get here?", asked the people who sat in a little house by the gate when they saw me walking instead of driving through the school gate:

me: By taxi. I got off at the police station (an established 'stop') and walked.

Lihle:³ Why do you not come by car?

me: I don't have a car.

Lihle: Why do you not have car?

me: I'm a student, I can't afford a car.

Lihle: Ah ok. Aren't you scared here in Khayelitsha?

me: No, I'm fine.⁴

Exchanges similar to this one often ensued during my first days at the school (see also Krause 2021). It mattered how I got there, because in South Africa forms of transport index social class. Social class, in turn, has historically been

3 The name has been changed.

4 This is not an exact transcript of such an exchange as I didn't record informal interactions. Rather, it is based on memory protocols from my field notes.

closely tied to race, due to colonialism and later Apartheid, when the ruling class was the White minority which ordered the population along racial lines (Bowker & Star 1999; Posel 2001).

While the entanglement of race and class is loosening, racial residential segregation persists. In Cape Town the working class areas equal Black or Coloured areas, while the middle class areas are more mixed but have a high proportion of Whites. Public transport here remains almost exclusively a non-White affair (Seekings 2008). In contrast to Germany, where CEOs may take trains and busses like everybody else, in South Africa you buy yourself free from the perceived (and actual) dangers of using public transport as soon as you can. The middle-class, and with it the majority of Whites, can sooner than others. Taking taxis to the research site had several effects: Firstly, while my plan already was to strategically position myself as a learner-researcher at the school, taking taxis to Khayelitsha made me realise that I am actually a learner in this space. An example from my fieldnotes illustrates the type of skills I had to learn over time by taking taxis:

Day 7 (30/10/13)
 Yuh! I sat next to the driver this morning! I really have to learn how to count that everyy just, I have to know how many people make what sum:
 → 1 - 14,50
 2 - 29
 3 - ~~42,50~~ 43,50
 4 - ~~56,50~~ 58
 5 - 72,50
 6 - 87
 → Then you just collect all you need (ask the driver how much he needs before) in one place & keep the rest in another, then you ask "Abantu bona change?"

Fig. 1: Field Notes 1

Since there is no conductor, whoever ends up sitting next to the driver is responsible for collecting the fares and then giving passengers their change back. On the 30th October 2013 that was me for the first time. With a price of ZAR 14,50 per person this responsibility overstrained my mathematically not very apt brain, so I wrote a calculation into my research diary for future reference. Below it is my step-by-step explanation to myself about how to go about the process of fee collection. The driver needs to tell you how many

passengers are on board – so how much money he expects. Then you can count that money up to the sum he mentions. The rest is the change that needs to be redistributed amongst the passengers. That process is initiated by turning to the passengers and asking: “Abantu banenchange?” (Does someone need change?). It took me a while but I eventually learned how to collect fees smoothly. It is experiences like this one that turned the somewhat arrogant ‘wanna-be-expert’ that left the taxi rank for the first time a week earlier into a humbled version of herself, a learner version.

Secondly, moving around like everybody else meant that at the school I had relatable stories to tell. From particularly complex routes the taxi took, via interesting conversations with passengers, to flat tires, smoking engines and the umlungu figuring out how to collect fares – out of necessity rather than strategically, taxis were not only my physical way into Khayelitsha but also part of the narrative that helped mitigate my foreignness at the school.

Thirdly, me taking public transport surprised the people at the school, because it contrasted with the behaviour of other White people that would occasionally visit. NGO workers or departmental officials come in their private cars and with particular agendas. Taxis made categorising me as ‘another White visitor’ more difficult. They cut across associations of class, race and behaviour, blurring on my behalf the lines of segregation so firmly implemented under apartheid: We live here, You live there. We can’t afford, You can afford. We take taxis, You drive cars. We are Black, You are White. It is not that taxis made me ‘We’, but they made me slightly less ‘You’. They helped in sending the message that I wasn’t there to teach, to ‘improve things’ or to check on things. Taxis were my first step to adopting a ‘learner’s stance’ as a researcher, which, in Marker’s words, “destabilizes the anthropologist’s dubious claim to being the expert” (2003: 369). I arrived, therefore, as a learner, struggling with transport, struggling with language, reliant on local experts. With hindsight, this was probably the first move towards gaining the trust of people at the school. The next step was to convince the principal and the teachers about the integrity of my research project so that I could get their informed consent to observe and record teaching and conduct interviews.

Introducing the project

2.1 Being a potential threat

While taking taxis made me into an actual learner somewhat contingently, I now consciously and strategically enacted this learner identity towards the future research participants. A staff meeting was called upon my request after I had spent a couple of days ‘hanging out’ at the school, getting to know the

secretary, the maintenance staff and the librarian. It was now time to talk to the teachers.

When everyone had sat down in the staff room, I nervously explained why I was there:

When I first came to Cape Town in 2009 I volunteered for an NGO, the one that is also doing work here at this school. It is through them that I got to know about your school here. During my work for them at a school in Observatory I saw for the first time that many children in South Africa cannot use the language they know best in the classroom. Their experience at school is therefore very different and much more complicated than mine was. I was born in Germany, spoke German at home and went to school in German. From first grade to matric. But children here in Khayelitsha have to deal with two languages of instruction, first Xhosa for three years and then the switch to English, even though English is a foreign language for them.⁵ Since then I've always thought that it must be so difficult to deal with this language situation in the classroom. I wouldn't know how to do it, because in German schools everything is in German. The reason I'm here is because I am interested in how you do it in your classrooms. I am convinced that we in Germany, because we are not used to linguistic diversity, have a lot to learn from South African teachers like you. This is why, if you allow me, I would love to spend some time at your school and observe some teaching. Also, I would love to interview you about your experiences with the language situation and your opinions about it. Whatever I learn here will be used for my Master's thesis only. Nobody will get to know the name of the school or of any of you.⁶

My introduction of the project shows how I consciously defined my researcher identity via a lack of knowledge, a lack of understanding due to my own educational background. I wanted the take away to be that I was there to learn, not to impart knowledge, not to criticise, not to judge. Even though teachers seemingly understood my motivations they were still sceptical. One of them eventually asked: "So how do we know that you are not connected to any political organisation or the department of education?" I realised then that trust wasn't going to be gained that easily.

My supervisor was right to warn me back in Germany when planning the project that I would probably be regarded as a potential threat at the school. This

5 In accordance with the widespread conviction that children learn best through their 'mother-tongue' Alexander (2009); Brock-Utne, Desai, and Qorro (2003), in areas where a dominant 'African language' can be identified – e.g., in Black townships like Khayelitsha in greater Cape Town – schools normally use this language as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in the Foundation Phase (from Grade R to Grade 3) in primary schools. Then again, aligned with the 'monolingual nation state ideal', in Grade 4 the LoLT changes to English in most schools (Ouane and Glanz 2011) – a so-called 'early transition' language policy model. For Khayelitsha this means three years with Xhosa as LoLT and then English from Grade 4.

6 This is not an exact transcript of what I said in the meeting but a condensed version based on a memory protocol as the meeting was not sound recorded.

needs to be understood in the context that township schools and teachers are highly stigmatised in South Africa. It has become common-sense that students here perform much worse than their peers from more affluent institutions located in the inner-city or suburbia (Department of Education 2017). Voices in the media (Nkosi 2016; van der Berg & Spaull 2017), scholarly work on township teaching (Nel & Müller 2010) and on parents' school choice for their children in South Africa (Lombard 2007; Maile 2004; Msila 2009), tend to imply that teachers are directly responsible for the often poor academic performance of their students.

No wonder then, that teachers would be wary about having a stranger sitting in their classrooms. Here, 'doing research' was neither a self-explanatory nor an easily explained activity. Why would I want to observe what people do at a 'peripheral school' generally criticised for bad rather than admired for best practice? Surely the real intention is to spill the beans about everything that is wrong with the place to local officials I stand in some undisclosed relationship with (see also Setati 2005 for a discussion). Especially my interest in multilingual classroom practices – or what is commonly referred to as 'code-switching' at the school – would likely worry teachers, because this practice in particular is seen as getting in the way of proper teaching. It is scrutinised by educational authorities that urge schools "to reduce the amount of code-switching and code mixing in order to ensure maximum exposure to the LoLT" (Western Cape Government 2017).

In response to the teacher's question, I again emphasised the learner's stance I was taking. I made as clear as I could that I was not interested in leaking any information and that I purely wanted to know how teachers dealt with an extremely complicated linguistic situation. I assured them that, for the first couple of weeks, I would not ask to enter their classrooms. Rather I would hang out at the school, help out where I could and work on my local language skills. I said that I would be around and that they could ask me any questions about me and my research whenever they liked. After a few weeks they could then still decide whether or not they felt comfortable having me in class. This was my way to work towards participants' informed consent via engagements at the research site rather than demanding it right here, right now (Gordon 2003). I emphasised that I will only observe classroom practice when the particular teacher agrees to host me in advance and that the same applied for conducting interviews. I again assured the anonymity of all research participants and the school itself and clarified that the research outcomes would only be used for my Master's thesis. When there were no further questions, the meeting was closed. Even though content with how I presented myself and my research, I walked away rather insecure about how things would move forward from here.

2.2 Hanging out and gaining trust

No attempts at getting access to classrooms for the first three weeks – that was my promise to myself after the meeting. Time for my more general ethnographic interest in finding out what is going on at the school more broadly (Heath & Street 2008), whilst working towards gaining the teachers' trust. I aimed at making sure that they saw me at the school consistently and at creating as many opportunities as possible for casual chats. A great way of doing this was to engage in language learning at the research site.

Coming from a background of African studies and having learned Swahili for five years at university, I came prepared to learn another language closely related in terms of grammatical structure: Xhosa. I had taught myself basic greeting procedures and some verbal structures so that I could begin immediately to ask people how to say this or that in Xhosa. I wrote everything down in my field journal, creating random vocabulary lists looking more or less like this one:

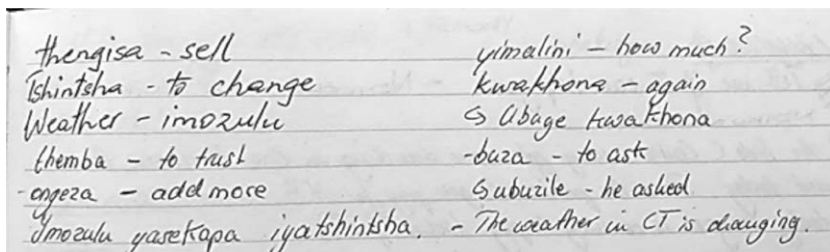


Fig. 2: Field Notes 2

The different handwritings show that sometimes teachers or staff would write words and their translations down for me if I struggled with spelling them. Turning the research participants into my informal language teachers was a great way to break the ice and to start conversations. Also, it continuously and literally reinforced my role as a learner at the research site. I was the one who didn't know, who struggled with pronunciation or with spelling. I was the one who made a fool of herself and who relied on local experts.

I also reliably arrived at the school without a car, walking through the gate. Being a taxi-taker, a Xhosa learner and someone who was always approachable for anyone seemed, over time, to mitigate the fear that I might be associated with officialdom and leak sensitive information. Teachers began to open up during our chats in the staff room, telling me about internal conflicts between teachers and the principal at the school, their struggles in the classroom, their weekends and their church. Maybe I had taxied and language my way in, I thought. So it was time to see if I could get access to classrooms.

3 Inside the classroom

3.1 They said yes!

At this stage, I understood better what it meant for teachers to let someone into their teaching space. Not only my potential communication with external officials scared them but also, there were tensions between some teachers and the principal. So maybe me talking to him about what I saw in classrooms also wasn't a great prospect. On top of that, teachers had big classes with between 35 and 40 children and were overworked. So I needed to make sure that I was as little of an additional burden as possible.

To my surprise, all the teachers I asked if I could observe their lessons said yes – even to my request to sound record them. They gave me written consent but under the condition that I will always ask their renewed oral consent each time before entering their classrooms. That was more than fine with me. I had been seriously anxious about the possibility of all of them refusing to let me in. This was a great day for the project but it wasn't smooth sailing from here. Gaining access to classrooms, I realised, is not something you tick off your to do list. It is an ongoing effort. Oftentimes I had to literally run after teachers on their way to the classroom to remind them that I was going to observe their next lesson – as agreed upon for example the day before. Teachers would sometimes react nervously, telling me the lesson was going to be 'boring', not worth seeing. They might say that if I told them what I was interested in they could give me a better lesson to observe. Just not this one right now.

These were critical moments. They were going to make the difference between the findings of large scale research projects, where observations take place maybe once a week on an agreed upon day and time, and a long term ethnographic study. The former gives teachers the chance to prepare a particularly well-structured lesson for that day and time, while the latter aims at gaining an insider's view of day-to-day (classroom) realities (Heath & Street 2008; Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtli 2006; Willig 2014).

I reacted by reassuring teachers that I wasn't interested in 'exciting' lessons and I wasn't going to evaluate them. Rather, I completely understood how not every lesson is going to be planned perfectly, seeing the huge workload teachers have to cope with. I emphasised that I was there to learn from them – especially how they dealt with everyday classroom realities, which I know could be messy and difficult. Most of the time, after such a conversation that took place for example while walking from the staff to the classroom, teachers then agreed to let me in. Sometimes they didn't. That's the risk one takes.

With hindsight, I think that teachers accommodated me most of the time because I positioned myself as a learner and thereby enabled them to 'do their job' with me in some ways. Outside the classroom they were my language

teachers and taught me about Khayelitsha, the school and their struggles and successes. Inside the classroom I was then also a learner – albeit a more passive one – observing and learning from how they did things. This is not simply a methodological swipe of hand. Rather, I actually firmly believe that for example Germany, with classrooms diversifying quickly due to new migratory dynamics (Markic & Abels 2014), could indeed learn a lot by looking at practices in Southern contexts where teachers have been dealing with linguistically complex classroom situations all along.

3.2 Not there to judge

As an ethnographer sometimes you can only guess in the aftermath what it was that made people grant you access to a certain space. It is always a complex assemblage of things. I was lucky enough to find out rather explicitly from one teacher – in an interview during my PhD research – what the difficulties were of having me in class but also how she appropriated my narrative of being an interested, non-judgemental learner in order to address the difficulties.

Interview Excerpt Grade 5 Teacher

T = Teacher R = Researcher (Lara Krause-Alzaidi, author)

- 1 **T:** [...] they didn't perform the same as when we are alone in class, without them in the
- 2 classroom. They seem to change. Just to accommodate this person or they're shy, let me
- 3 just put it that way.
- 4 **R:** Do you feel like that was always the case when I was there or did they also get used to me
- 5 a bit?
- 6 **T:** Yes they were getting used to you because I always told them that Achwayitile works in
- 7 our school.⁷ She's been here for a long time. She understands Xhosa. She's also an English
- 8 teacher. Don't mind her when she is here. She is here just to see how we do things in our
- 9 school. She's not here to judge you. So just be yourself when she is here. I tried to tell
- 10 them, yes. But I could see the first time she came, all the time before they say anything
- 11 they say anything they will have one look at Achwayitile before they answered.
- 12 **R:** Yah but then that I felt like also they didn't even notice me anymore.
- 13 **T:** Yah with time then they didn't.

She here speaks about her experience that the presence of an observer can distract students. In lines 1-3 she refers to visits from subject advisors or from colleagues – teachers sometimes observe each other's lessons – and how her students would react to that with shyness. I then took the opportunity to ask whether my presence in the classroom had been distracting (line 4-5). Her response in lines 10-11 shows a clear 'observer effect' (McIntyre 1980), i.e., how

7 'Achwayitile' is the Xhosa name I was given early on at the school. Also, during my PhD I indeed worked for the NGO at the school for a while, organising the volunteers who provided an English literacy support program for students.

my presence in the beginning de-routinised classroom practices and effected how students (and probably also the teacher) behaved, until I slowly became part of the furniture (line 12-13) (see also Setati 2005).

This teacher, as she explains in lines 6-9, took an active role in mitigating this observer effect. Her response shows the extent to which she had appropriated the narrative with which I was positioning myself as a learner-researcher at the school from the first day I arrived:

- I understand (or at least make a substantial effort to understand) Xhosa (line 7)
- I am the one who stands to learn something from how things are done at the school (line 8-9)
- I don't intend to 'judge' or evaluate practices (line 9)

She refers to me as an English teacher (line 7-8), which might be a side effect of my emphasis on how interested I am in learning from teachers' practices in Khayelitsha so I could take those insights to Germany. I clarified with her afterwards that I am actually not a teacher but a researcher. Nevertheless, as I mentioned before, research in this space is not a self-explanatory or familiar activity. So to make students understand why I was there, describing me as an interested English teacher framed my presence in familiar terms and made the slight departure from the truth seem uncontroversial to me.

My positioning as a learner-researcher resonated with this teacher and her comments and actions illustrate how it can be a powerful way of building trust and mitigating the observer effect and initially perceived threats. By speaking to the students on my behalf and explaining my presence, this particular teacher helped me a great deal in creating a classroom atmosphere where students could – over time – be comfortable with my presence (line 6; 12-13). I take from this that my long-term presence and engagement at the school, and the learner identity I was forging throughout, have allowed me to observe teaching practices that came at least close to the day-to-day realities.

While other teachers didn't make it as explicit – in my next research project I would ensure to ask every teacher about how they perceived and dealt with my presence in class – after having me in class once or twice I noticed that the gazes of the students towards me became less. Since they had been seeing me at the school for a while now, I wasn't such a curiosity anymore. Mundane classroom routines, as far as I could recognise them, set in rather quickly.

4 Conclusion: So what?

Telling the story of accessing a research field from taxis to classrooms shows that a complex assemblage of practices, vehicles, people, anxieties, highways and histories needs to be negotiated until one gets to see some teaching. That is, if one is interested in accessing spaces that lie outside the well-researched mainstream. Here, teachers often have a lot to lose and a researcher is a potential threat. I here provided insights into the practices that have helped me to find my way to and into the school, and eventually into classrooms.

Taxiing and later language learning confronted me with my lack of local knowledge and nudged me into the role of a learner who relies on local expertise – a role that I would later carry over into the school as a researcher who takes a learner-stance.

Taxiing and languaging also influenced the way I was received at the school. They prevented me from being put straight into the ‘White visitors’ category and sheltered me from the associations that come with that category and over which I have no control. These practices were also ice-breakers, common topics to chat about. They made me more relatable – more ‘We’ than ‘You’ – and, over time, more trustworthy.

While, like all ethnographies, the scenario described here is very particular, I believe that a question of more general applicability can be derived from it that might help in planning to gain access to sensitive research fields in international contexts: How can researchers immerse themselves in the context of their research location in such a way that it:

- a) broadens their horizons by making them aware of what they don't know?
- b) creates common experiences between them and the participants with their otherwise very different life worlds?

The answers will certainly not always be taxiing and language learning but each research site affords us its own opportunities for such practices. We just have to remember to look for them instead of trying to head straight for the classroom.

Once inside the classroom, again a lot depends on the previous work outside. For example, as discussed in 3.2, a careful positioning – in my case as a learner-researcher – before asking to enter the classroom can help to win teachers as allies in mitigating the researcher's foreignness in the classroom. Questions of more general applicability for researchers then become: How much time should I spend at the school before attempting to gain access to classrooms? And: How should I position myself as a researcher so that I can gain the participants' trust? (see Hopwood 2007 for a helpful discussion)

I leave the work on this chapter with a scepticism towards terms like 'teaching research' or 'classroom research' in international contexts. In the project at hand, much of the essential work happened outside the classrooms. If we want to broaden our horizons and take our dependency on the research location seriously, then I suggest that we need to integrate into our research plans time for struggles, time for taxis, time for anxiety, indeed: time for ethnography. Instead of aiming at teaching or classroom research I suggest we make time for school-based ethnographies. Because actually we don't know how things work in their schools.

References

- Alexander, Neville (2009): Mother tongue based bilingual education in Africa: A cultural and intellectual imperative. In: Gogolin, Ingrid; Neumann, Ursula (Eds.): *Streitfall Zweisprachigkeit – The bilingualism controversy*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 199-214.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C.; Star, Susan L. (1999): *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Inside technology. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.
- Brock-Utne, Birgit; Desai, Zubeida; Qorro, Martha A. S. (2003): *Language of instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA)*. Dar es Salaam: E & D Limited.
- Clark, Peter; Crous, Wilfred (2002): Public transport in metropolitan Cape Town: Past, present and future. In: *Transport Reviews*, 22 (1), pp. 77-101.
- D'hondt, Sigurd (2009): Calling the stops in a Dar-es-Salaam minibus: Embodied understandings of place in a drop-off routine. In: *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(10), pp. 1962-1976.
- Department of Education (2017): *Implementation evaluation of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R to 12: Focusing on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)*. Pretoria.
- Gordon, Elisa, J. (2003): Trials and tribulations of navigating IRBs: Anthropological and biomedical perspectives of "risk" in conducting human subjects research. In: *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76 (2), pp. 299-320.
- Heath, Shirley B.; Street, Brian V. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hopwood, Nick (2007). Researcher roles in a school-based ethnography. In: *Methodological Developments in Ethnography*, 12, pp. 51-68.
- Lodico, Marguerite G.; Spaulding, Dean T.; Voegtli, Katherine H. (2006): *Methods in educational research: From theory to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lombard, Kobus (2007): Reasons why educator-parents based at township schools transfer their own children from township schools to former Model C schools. In: *Education as Change*, 11 (1), pp. 43-57.
- Maile, Simeon (2004): School choice in South Africa. In: *Education and Urban Society*, 37(1), pp. 94-116.
- Marker, Michael (2003): Indigenous voice, community, and epistemic violence: The ethnographer's "interests" and what "interests" the ethnographer. In: *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16 (3), pp. 361-375.
- Markic, Silvija; Abels, Simone (2014): Heterogeneity and diversity: A growing challenge or enrichment for science education in German schools? In: *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science & Technology Education*, 10 (4), pp. 271-283.
- McIntyre, D. John (1980): Teacher evaluation and the observer effect. In: *NASSP Bulletin*, 64 (434), pp. 36-40.

- Msila, Vuyisile (2009): School choice and intra-township migration: Black parents scrambling for quality education in South Africa. In: *Journal of Education*, 46, pp. 81-98.
- Nel, Norma; Müller, Heléne (2010): The impact of teachers' limited English proficiency on English second language students in South African schools. In: *South African Journal of Education*, 30 (4), pp. 635-650.
- Nkosi, Milton (2016): Is South Africa's education system really 'in crisis'? URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35427853>, [accessed: 18 April 2024].
- Ouane, Adama; Glanz, Christine (Eds.) (2011): *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother-tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. New York: Mark Batty Publisher.
- Posel, Deborah (2001): What's in a name: Racial categorisations under apartheid and their after-life. In: *Transformation*, 47, pp. 59-82.
- Ramphele, L. (2018): CoCT announces new measures to deal with reckless taxi drivers. URL: <http://capetalk.co.za/articles/295037/coct-announces-new-measures-to-deal-with-reckless-taxi-driver>, [accessed 24 September 2020].
- Seekings, Jeremy (2008): The continuing salience of race: Discrimination and diversity in South Africa. In: *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 26 (1), pp. 1-25.
- Setati, Mamokgethi (2005): Researching teaching and learning in school from "with" or "on" teachers to "with" and "on" teachers: Conversations. In: *Perspectives in Education*, 23(1), pp. 91-101.
- Twidle, Hedley (2017): N2: Reading, writing, walking the South African highway. In: *Social Dynamics*, 43 (1), pp. 59-81.
- Van der Berg, Servaas; Spaull, Nicholas (2017): SA education: The poorest choice. *Mail & Guardian*. URL: <https://mg.co.za/rtitle/2011-04-08-sa-education-the-poorest-choice/>, [accessed 18 April 2024].
- Western Cape Government (2017): Curriculum FET minute: DCF 0016/2017 Retention of language compensation until 2022. URL: https://wcedonline.westerncape.gov.za/circulars/minutes17/CMminutes/edcf16_17.html, [accessed 19 February 2025].
- Willig, Carla (2014): Interpretation and analysis. In: Flick, Uwe (Ed.): *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, pp. 136-150.

The author

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie (PhD) is Assistant Professor at the Chair of African Languages and Literatures, Institute of African Studies, Leipzig University, Germany.

Having completed her PhD in African Languages, focussed on multilingual English teaching, in Cape Town, she is now working at the intersection of African Studies and Applied Linguistics. She is interested in language and race and in studying ontologies of language.

ORCID: 0000-0002-9086-6785