‘Not an ogre’: adult music learners and their teachers

a corpus-based discourse analysis
Rachel Shirley, Lancaster University

Introduction

An estimated 34% of adults in the UK play an instrument, with 2.5m currently receiving musical tuition. Many adults report ‘social, cognitive, emotional, and health benefits’ from participating in musical activities. Despite this, adult music learning is an under-researched area, with the vast majority of music education research and training focussing on children.

Although music education research often uses text (interviews, autobiographical accounts, survey responses), linguistic analysis has barely been used in this area. Meanwhile, the internet has become a source of support and expression for adult music learners, on blogs and forums. Music learners’ relationships with teachers is a major theme in existing literature, and this study, part of a larger project, uses a corpus of online texts to explore discourses surrounding these learners’ experiences and opinions of music teachers.

Methodology

• 500,000 word corpus of text posted online by adult learners of music between January 2010 and April 2015.
• Corpus analysed using AntConc software.
• Collocate search for teacher to find words frequently co-occurring with teacher/teachers (span 5L, 5R; minimum collocate frequency = 1; sorted by MI score) found 2287 collocates.
• First 1000 collocates categorised – three main groups identified:
  o Emotions/feelings
  o Verbal processes
  o Metaphors

Emotions and feelings

Some apparently stronger emotion terms, particularly negative ones, are preceded by mitigators or otherwise modified, suggesting ‘low level’ concerns or quite detailed analysis of the learner/teacher relationship:

feeling a bit overwhelmed at times, my teacher packed so much in, ‘my teacher was a bit shocked’.

However, apparently milder emotions are often preceded by intensifiers or in phrases which heighten their intensity:

‘I really liked it, my teacher knew I would’
‘I have huge doubt that my teacher…’

Intensifiers are also applied to some stronger emotions:

‘I was totally amazed that my teacher…’
‘I was so traumatised by the music teacher’

Intensifying of emotions suggests that some learners have very strong feelings around their relationships with teachers, and their experience of being taught.

Metaphors - violence, injury and war

pounced, knocks, struck, torn, inflict, flogging, murdering, whip, shreds, struck
battling, conflicting, lost, revenge, reinforcement

Many refer to actions by or attitudes of teachers, e.g. ‘my teacher pounced on my least favourite out of them’, ‘torn to shreds by your teacher’, ‘for your teacher to periodically whip out and frighten you with’. These imply some fear of teachers.

Could be compounded by the presence of ogre in the collocate list, but this turns out to be a learner ‘on a pedestal’. Learners feel that they have to apologise for ‘not on an ogre’. This does however highlight discussions around whether teachers are friendly or feared.

Some refer to learners: ‘didn’t want to inflict it on my teacher’, ‘as soon as I have to play in front of anyone (including my teacher) I feel I’m murdering the piece’. There is a sense that playing ‘badly’ is somehow injurious to their teacher or to the piece of music itself. This lies in with the ‘apologising’ verbal processes attributed to learners.

There is a sense of fighting with difficult pieces: ‘my teacher has me battling with [a particular piece of music]’. The image of the teacher ‘sending the learner into battle’ suggests a discourse of teacher control. Revenge is used in the sense of the learner regaining control: ‘I have a plan to get revenge on my teacher for always finding something wrong with my playing’.

Conclusions

Metaphors of violence, injury, and war, and the attribution of strong negative verbal processes to teachers suggest that teachers are sometimes ‘feared’ and have more of the control in the relationship. This is compounded by metaphors of religion – placing the teacher ‘on a pedestal’. Learners feel that they have to apologise for ‘not doing well’, and there is often a sense that they want to impress and please teachers. Intensified emotions imply strong reactions to music teaching, whilst modified ones suggest complex and detailed analysis.

This research has the potential to inform music educators - individual teachers, organisations who offer music education training, music exam boards when considering how to meet the needs of adult learners, and community music organisations who are seeking to engage with and support adults.

The study also confirms the potential of corpus-based discourse analysis (which is increasingly being used outside linguistics) in the realm of music education.

Online data - ethical considerations

• Although site contents are public there is an expectation/sense of privacy/anonymity, e.g. in forums or online chatrooms.
• Would informing ‘participants’ constitute interfering in this community, cause problems or change the nature of postings?
• If used data anonymously – not identifying websites; no usernames; only publicly available text (no logging in), not quoting personal information, e.g. real names or descriptions of personal circumstances.

Verbal processes

Teachers are ‘sayers’ of positive verbal processes - learners appreciate praise from teachers. Negative verbal processes are split between teachers and learners.

Apologising (26 occurrences) is attributed exclusively to learners, for ‘poor performance’ or lack of practice. Learners also whinge, refuse, beg, complain: ‘I grizzle and whinge whenever teacher gets the book out’.

Stronger negative terms are mainly assigned to teachers:

‘my teacher has threatened to drag me to the exam’, ‘my teacher nags me about bad habits too much’

Metaphors - religion

angel, saint, saints, faith, spirit, soul, believes, praise.

Generally used in conventional metaphorical ways:

‘my teacher has the patience of a saint’. Variations of ‘my teacher has faith in me’, often with the idea that the teacher ‘has more faith in me than I do’.

Suggests that the ‘belief’ and opinions of teachers are important to adult learners. Highlights qualities that learners appreciate – patience and diplomacy – but also places teachers on ‘a pedestal’ which contributes to discourse of teacher control.

Rachel Shirley sheffieldflute@gmail.com
www.sheffieldflute.co.uk https://lancaster.academia.edu/RachelShirley