

# 'Not an ogre': adult music learners and their teachers

## a corpus-based discourse analysis

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### Introduction



An estimated 34% of adults in the UK play an instrument<sup>1</sup>, with 2.5m currently receiving musical tuition. Many adults report "social, cognitive, emotional, and health benefits" from participating in musical activities<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>.
- 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 2267 collocates.
- First 1000 collocates categorised – three main groups identified:
  - o Emotions/ feelings
  - o Verbal processes<sup>4</sup>
  - 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.

positive	negative
thrilled	horrified
smiled	downer
happy	temper
laughing	scarier
loved	puzzled
gratified	downer
delighted	dismayed
happily	annoyingly
laughed	traumatised
delight	baffled
liking	doubts
delighted	exhausting
keen	phobia
satisfied	irrational
proud	annoyance
fond	apprehensive
smiles	dreaded
enjoyed	devastated
pleasantly	doubt
impressed	overwhelmed
amazed	confuse
enjoys	frustrated
courage	annoying
liked	fear
	shocked
	crazy

Emotion/ feeling collocates in order of MI score

### 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?
- I 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

positive	negative
thanking	whinge
complimented	complain
praising	nags
advise	blame
assures	gloat
praise	demand
reassured	apologised
advised	refused
agreed	warn
compliments	threatened
advised	disagree
encouraged	apologising
praised	begged
	demanding
	shouted

Verbal process collocates in order of MI score.

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, begged, 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/ believes 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.



### 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 stating that their teacher **'is not 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 ties 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.

#### References

- 1 Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (2014). *Making Music: Teaching, learning & playing in the UK*. London: ABRSM.
- 2 Hallam, S., Creech, A., Gaunt, H., Pincas, A., Varvargou, M., & McQueen, H. (2013). *Music for life project: The role of participation in community music activities in promoting social engagement and well-being in older people*. Sheffield, UK: NDA Research Programme.
- 3 Anthony, L. (2011). AntConc (Version 3.2.4) [Computer Software]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Available from <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/>
- 4 Halliday, M.A.K. & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Hodder Education.