Swimmin' Against A Tide of Social and Cultural Prejudice in Education: Reuniting the Vocational and the Academic in the Study of Language

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Abstract

Focusing primarily on how curriculum theory and assessment directly impact upon learning, this paper presents and discusses learners' lived experiences of studying GCSE English at a Further Education (FE) college in London. The aim of this small-scale research is to deepen understanding of why disengagement with formal modes of the study of English language is so prevalent among learners in FE. It also analyses whether student engagement in English language learning can be increased by introducing more socially-situated literacies into vocational learning and language development activities. This approach to exploring how students respond to the disconnect between socially-situated literacies and functional literacies is informed by Gadamer's 'Fusion of Horizons' [5]. Subsequently, my interest in Gadamer's work leads me to the respective works of Zimmerman [9], Freire [4] and Bernstein [2].

It is argued that low attendance and disappointing outcomes in GCSE English re-sit written examinations in FE are in part, symptoms of wider issues surrounding a deep-rooted disengagement with, and lack of motivation for, the study of language. However, my experience as a teacher of vocational education indicates that the same students can engage meaningfully with language when the mode of language they study more closely reflects the realities of their cultural, personal and social experiences and life histories.

Literature in this field of educational research suggests that opinions around language that exist in some educational institutions may be contributing to this disenfranchisement. At best, the existence of this phenomenon highlights an excessive reliance on traditional values, to the detriment of the learner's ability to engage in the study of language. Perhaps even more troubling, is the acceptance of a wider and rather elitist ideology regarding the "correct" use of English. The assumption that there is one and only one "correct" way to use the English language is often coupled with the assumption that there is only one way in which ability with language can be acquired, developed and assessed - and that is in the form of written examinations.

This study looks beyond and behind the view of what may be considered as "correct" or "incorrect" use of *English language. Instead, the focus of this research is upon how encouraging students to use language more appropriate to context, identity, and their social environment, might assist them in re-connecting with language acquisition and development in ways which unite the vocational and the academic through the development of, and participation in, socially-situated literacies.*

1. Introduction

During the 2021 Summer Olympic Games, Lord Digby Jones [8], a member of the House of Lords criticised BBC presenter and ex-professional footballer, Alex Scott, on social media because of the fact that Scott, speaking with a regional East London accent, failed to fully pronounce the letter 'g' when saying words such as running or swimming. Digby Jones claimed that Scott's accent ruined the coverage of the Olympic Games and vowed not to watch any longer, asking "Can't someone give these people elocution lessons?" before her incorrect use of the English language was "aped by youngsters" who think "that it is very fashionable to go around dropping your 'gs'" [8]

Shortly after this, a London Secondary School, All Saints Academy (2021), banned students from using socially-situated terms such as 'like,' 'bare' and 'cuss.' Expressions including, 'Oh my days' and 'That's long,' were also deemed as an insufficiently appropriate use of language [6]. The reasoning behind this restraint on their learner's idiomatic voice was that the decision makers at All Saints Academy wanted their students to be able to express themselves in a more 'proper' way.

Recent language-based events such as these can be easily dismissed as minority acts of snobbery. However, this study reveals how the above events are reflective of a far wider, more historic, elitist ideology on how the English Language is perceived including assumptions and diktat that there is only one correct way to use language. It also highlights a deep-rooted prejudice that exists around language both in society and, perhaps more worryingly, in education more generally. Failing to recognise the importance of the context in which language is used is pressuring students to reject the historic and rich

cultural influences on their language. This raises more serious questions regarding the influence of these prejudices on a learner's identity and almost inevitably this is likely to have a negative impact on their confidence and ability to use language in their personal and vocational-professional lives. Removing freedom and creativity from speaking, listening and writing in ways which diminish the social, cultural and economic circumstances of a person's birth, and restricts their access to a universe of human ideas and language is not only morally indefensible but also socially, culturally and vocationally limited and limiting Freire [4] asserts, that to "steal the words of others" is to "consider them incompetent". For Freire, a central concern is that this assumed incompetence can too easily transfer from organisation to teacher and learner until all parties are indoctrinated in the belief that certain students are collectively, "unfit for anything except to receive the teachings of the professionals." [4]

2. Research Questions

In this paper, the following research questions have been identified:

1. What are learners' lived experiences of studying language on their vocational and GCSE study programmes in Further Education (FE) and how do these experiences influence their level of engagement?

2. What role can socially-situated literacies, or language from the learner's socio-cultural realities play in embedding and deepening learners' engagement in the study and development of language?

3. How do learners' experiences of elitist prescriptivism in language acquisition and development in FE, and in education in general, influence their engagement in the study of language?

4. What role might aesthetic experiences, such as music, film or imagery, play in engaging learners in language acquisition and development activities and in the emotional experience of learning?

3. Background

As explained above, this study explores learners' lived experiences of undertaking GCSE English re-sits examinations in Further Education (FE). It attempts to better understand why disengagement with more formal modes of studying language is so prevalent in the vocational learners that I teach whilst also analysing what impact more socially-situated literacies (instead of, or alongside functional literacies in the study of language) might have on learner engagement in vocational education contexts. For the past decade I have taught in a dual role as both a Lecturer in Plumbing and an English GCSE teacher in a large FE College in East London. Throughout this time, I have had extensive experiences of working with 16-19-year-old learners. Typically, these learners come to FE somewhat disengaged and disenfranchised with the study of language in education. In my experience, this disenfranchisement is rooted in a disappointing, and in some cases, demeaning involvement with the study of language at school. However, my experience has also demonstrated to me that these same learners often choose to write, read, recite, and analyse the language that comes from their world. I teach learners who have enthusiastically filled notepads with lyrics to songs, who can recite song lyrics on demand and who are enthused when I ask them to explain what the lyrics in a song they enjoy means to them. Often drawing inspiration from the world of music, this language may also come from film, television or simple conversations with friends and family. In any circumstance, this is the language in which my learners have learned to think and speak. It is innate to their consciousness. Within its expression they find meaning, and make sense of their respective experiences and realities. Poor attendance and outcomes in GCSE English amongst students in FE are, in part, symptoms of wider issues around a disengagement with, and a lack of motivation for, the mode of language typically associated with the GCSE English curriculum. This study explores what impact studying a mode of language more relevant to context may have on learners in FE.

This research also identifies and examines an apparent disconnect between the socio-cultural realities of the lives of my learners and the GCSE English curriculum. The majority of learners in FE have previously taken a written English GCSE examination and therefore, have been exposed to the content of the GCSE English Language curriculum. When these learners arrive in FE for a 'fresh start' in their educational lives, the disappointment they experience is palpable when they are presented with the same dreary curriculum content again! More often than not, this leads them to expect the same discouraging and predictable outcome for themselves as before.

Many of these students already regard themselves as 'failures' in the very language in which they think and speak. Damaging assumptions are made regarding their abilities and future potential. The implications of the unspoken but ever-present inference that they are somehow 'less intelligent' than their peers start to manifest. Other labels are brandished about and many learners come into FE believing that they are 'not academic'. Therefore, the

assumption was made at some point in their lives that they would not, and possibly never will, achieve much to be proud of in the study of language.

The apparent existence of a divide between the vocational and the academic in education is questionable and widely documented. In 2016 a report carried out by the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility [7]. It states that: "The inequality between vocational and academic education has had a significant impact on the overlooked majority of young people on whom our inquiry has focused. It is a long-standing and deep-rooted issue that will not be overcome easily or soon."

This serves as an important and salutary reminder of the individuals who are disproportionately affected by the systematic portrayal of vocational learners in the UK, in ways which depict them as having lower educational, intellectual, and social status. The downgrading of vocational education to a second-class intellectual pursuit can be clearly identified by vocational teachers such as myself and many of my colleagues. It is even more worrying that it is evidently recognized by the learners themselves. It may also be worth noting the snobbery around traditional curriculum content, identified by the same Select Committee which includes a warning regarding the existence of an "Unspoken snobbery in favour of academic qualifications" [7].

This study raises questions regarding the purpose of education itself. Questions surrounding the purpose of education are often simplified in debates, with one side arguing that a good education should empower individuals to lead fulfilling lives, make positive contributions to society, and become responsible citizens. This perspective calls for an education worthy of the name that instils a sense of new possibilities and encourages the development of agency and autonomy in learners, shaping their connection with the world and promoting both personal and societal well-being. The emphasis here is upon the importance of education in providing structure and significance to a person's perception of society in which there is hope for a better future. On the other hand, there are those who contend that the primary objective of education is to equip individuals with job skills, making them valuable assets to others and ensuring their compliance as citizens. These binary framings are of course crude and highly questionable. These issues are considered in more detail in this research. Furthermore, this study questions the extent to which curricula designed to prepare learners for a life of social interactions are disregarding the social and cultural world in which these same learners exist. I have had many professional discussions in which people argue that the content of curricula is rendered somewhat irrelevant if learners are not attending lessons. However, I would argue that poor learner attendance or learner behaviours that fail to dispose learners towards getting the most out of a curriculum are, in part, symptoms of a curriculum that ignores the socio-cultural worlds in which our learners live. Attempts to spoon-feed learners language content based on arbitrary middle-class British themes that have little or no bearing upon their lives is at worst insulting and demeaning, at best pointless. The more we force alien worlds upon our students in their education, the more they are likely retreat into their own worlds where they have some dignity and a sense of belonging. The risk here is that the distance between teachers of GCSE English and their learners grows ever wider while levels of learner disengagement deteriorate further. As Zimmerman [9] reflects:

"We only really engage a text or another's viewpoint when we want to know what meaning another's perspective has for us. It is the hope for every teacher that students reading an assigned text will begin to see its relevance for their own lives. If this does not happen then the text will remain a foreign object without meaning".

An objective of this study is to take learners' lives and their experiences of studying language in FE seriously. It also represents an attempt to reconnect learners with language on their terms by encouraging them to explore the language of their world in an educational setting which values the language they already have and use daily.

Capturing a wholeness of learner's experiences and perspectives is of paramount importance to the authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness and usefulness of this study.

4. Literature Review

This study draws influence and direction from a range of sources and literature. The topic of how language acquisition and development is taught in education has been written about extensively, as has the common and ubiquitous threads of snobbery and prejudice that exist in some educational settings. Bernstein's [2] work on *Pedagogic Rights* has been a consistent influence on both my approach to outlining the purpose of this study, and to how data is collected and analysed. Bernstein's three *Pedagogic Rights* consist of *Enhancement, Inclusion and Participation.* This study is particularly concerned with how learners themselves experience or fail to experience these *Pedagogic Rights* in action in their education and the possible consequences for our learners if teachers fail to defend and uphold these rights in educational practice.

As explained above, Gadamer's [5] theory of a *'Fusion of Horizons'* is also a key influence to this study. Here, Gadamer suggests that none of us think on a horizon that is unique and as such, we are all capable of understanding a range of opinions and concepts, as long as we are able to relate some aspect of these concepts to our own lived experience and/ or understanding of the social world. This theory has inspired me in conducting this study to look beyond the typical content and themes of a GCSE English study programme in order to explore the impact upon learners of linking learning content more closely to the socio-cultural realties of their lives. This in turn leads to me to how Dewey [3] foregrounds how easily individual variation may be disregarded in education and how encouraging learners to mix their personal interests with the material they study in education may lead to a *'heightened vitality',* which "signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."

Although data collection is still in progress, emerging themes suggest that learners are able to find a deep and meaningful connection with their world through music. As such, this study employs an approach to research that acts upon forms of expression chosen by students participating in this study. An intention here is put my interpretations of data generated in this study to work in order to further inform how well we know our learners and therefore, how best to teach them by allowing them to use language in ways which aims to enhance and enrich them both inside and outside of education. This approach has been influenced by Barone and Eisner [1] and their work in *Arts Based Research.*

5. Methodology

This study and the data collected in this research are qualitative in nature and therefore, a constructivist-interpretivist-hermeneutical research paradigm is adopted. Furthermore, this study's approach to collecting data is inductive, in that there is no fixed hypothesis and data is collected and analysed without bias or distortion. As the research participation count is 9 (including myself), this study focuses on capturing accounts of experience from a small number of particular cases with the intention of moving incrementally towards what may plausibly be inferred to be more general themes or cases that may help to shed new light on the problem(s) being investigated.

6. Methods

This study collects data from a Case Study approach formed of three research participation groups. Group A and Group B are made up of three student participants each. These students are currently studying, or have recently completed an English GCSE re-sit in FE. Group C is made up of two GCSE English teachers. Set out below are the methods employed in this study in order to capture the learner participants' experiences of studying language, and the experiences from those who teach GCSE English language in FE.

6.1. Focus Groups

Focus groups are collaborative sessions in which I meet with one of the research groups contributing to this study to discuss language. The key aim of these Focus Group sessions is to allow the participants to explore their historic and recent experiences of studying language or teaching language, respectfully. As the facilitator in these sessions, I start the conversation with some pre-prepared questions which allow the participants autonomy in taking the discussion in the direction they feel is most suitable. Subsequently, I build upon their responses in ways which encourage the conversation to develop further.

6.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structed Interviews are also used in this study. These are similar in format to the Focus Groups. However, these meetings are with individual research participants as opposed to meeting as a group. The aim of these meetings is to allow each research participant time and space to share their experiences away from other members of the study and open up a space for them to be candid and share experiences they may not wish to share in the company of their peers. As with the Focus Groups, I have pre-prepared questions but again, participants can steer these discussions and take the lead where they want to.

6.3. Language Activities

Student participants taking part in this research study are also asked to periodically take part in language activities. The purpose of these activities is two-fold. The first aim is to experiment with using socially-situated literacies in language activities to monitor learner engagement. The second is to understand what impact using aesthetic experiences might have on learner motivation. These language tasks are all designed to remove, reduce or weaken any dichotomy between how these learners connect with language within, and outside of education in order to see what impact this has on how they feel about undertaking language acquisition and development activities in FE.

7. Data Analysis

This study is still in the data collection and analysis stage of the research process. It is therefore likely that other procedures for analysing data within this study may develop further as more data analysis takes place. However, currently this study is using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The very nature of collecting varying experiences to build a bank of data can lead to complexities and confusion. However, Thematic Analysis stands as a data collection method used to generate knowledge grounded in human experience. To promote a sense of consistency throughout this study, data are themed in such a way as to explore key concepts from the literature that have influenced this study. In practice, this means that research participant data is analysed by coding responses in relation to Bernstein's [2] *Pedagogic Rights*, Gadamer's [5] *Fusion of Horizons* and Dewey's [3] *Heightened Vitality*. Coding the data in relation to these concepts also means that abstract themes such as motivation and engagement can be defined within the boundaries of the literature that this study is built upon.

8. Conclusions

As this study is on-going, I have no final conclusions or recommendations to make at this stage. However, early findings from the data analysis process suggest that disengaged and disenfranchised learners can and do engage in the study of language when the mode of literature more closely reflects their social reality. Also, emerging themes suggest that learners question the validity of the way that language is assessed in FE and themselves have strong opinions on alternate assessment methods that move away from high-stakes, paper-based tests.

9. References

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