Angels and ogres -
Online discourses of adult music learners, a corpus-based study

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is two-fold – to explore the potential of linguistic analysis techniques in music education research; and to use these techniques to investigate the discourses of adult learners in music, specifically those around learners and their teachers. Although music education research often uses text (interviews, autobiographical accounts, survey responses), linguistic analysis has barely been used in this area. Equally, the internet has become a source of support and expression for learners, using blogs and forum discussions, but these are an untapped data resource in music education research. Corpus linguistics techniques, which enable semi-automated analyses of databases of text, are increasingly being used in other discipline areas to identify patterns in large sets of textual data, and thus investigate recurring discourses, but have not yet been exploited in music education research. In this study I use corpus techniques to investigate discourses of adult music learners using text from online sources. I begin by summarising current literature on adult music learners, which identifies them as an under-researched group, and the background to corpus-based discourse analysis. I discuss the ethical challenges of using online data, how corpus linguistics techniques may provide solutions, and my approach to these challenges. I use a corpus-based approach to explore the discourses around learners and their teachers, looking in particular at metaphorical language. Discourses around teachers suggest that the learner/ teacher relationship is crucial, but can be problematic - issues around control are evident, but there is a feeling that learners welcome some level of control. I conclude that corpus-based discourse analysis has the potential to enrich music education research, and suggest other ways in which it might be used. In the area of adult music education, this research has the potential to inform teachers, training and community organisations and exam boards, to help them better meet the needs of this group which often 'falls through the gaps'.

Keywords: music education, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, adult learners, research methods

Introduction

An estimated 34% of adults (17.2m) in the UK play an instrument (ABRSM, 2014, p. 15) and another 23% would like to learn (NIACE, 2015). Many adults report "social, cognitive, emotional, and health benefits" from participating in musical activities (Hallam et al., 2013). Despite this, adult music learning is a relatively under-researched area. However, there is an increasing interest in the needs of adult music learners, reflected in the publication of specific tutor books (e.g. Hammond, 2008; Wedgwood,

2006) and the presence of online forums, communities and blogs where adult learners share their experiences and seek support. Although music education research often uses various types of texts (interviews, autobiographical accounts, questionnaire responses), linguistic analysis has barely been used in this area, and the wealth of online data has not been explored.

What is an adult learner?

For the purposes of this research, an 'adult music learner' is anyone who defines themselves as such, including adult beginners, restarters and continuers. They are predominantly amateur players, mainly in the classical tradition. Professional musicians and aspiring professionals (e.g. University/ Conservatoire students) tend not to be referred to as adult learners, suggesting a strong association of this label with amateur status.

Literature review

Adult music education

Forrester (1975, cited in Bowles, 2010, p. 51) described adult music education as a "new frontier" forty years ago. Today, music education research still primarily focuses on children, and there is "little… documentation of the extent of adult participation in the arts" (Pitts, 2012, p. 145). However, in the years since Forester's work, there has been a small but gradually growing body of research into adult music learning. In this literature review I focus on recent studies, reviewing current trends and findings.

These are generally small-scale studies, using participant interviews, questionnaires or autobiographical techniques such as 'life stories' (Pitts, 2012) or 'life paths' (Taylor, 2011). There is an emphasis on older adults (Bowles, 2010, p. 50), but Pitts (2012, p.141) highlights a "trend towards increased self-development between the ages of 35 and 65… [offering] a prompt to considering the motivation of adult learners" (Pitts, 2012, p. 141).

Researchers find varying attitudes, from it being 'never too late' to learn, to feeling restricted by age. Some learners feel limited by "assumptions about the optimal age for learning an instrument" (Pitts, 2012, p. 141), the "discourse around talent" (Lamont, 2011, p. 384) and a narrative of "regret about wasted time" (Lamont, 2011, p. 380). Many have "a constant awareness of their own perceived inadequacies" (Hobbs, 2014, p. 20) and "a relatively negative musical identity" (Lamont, 2011, p. 369).

Studies highlight adult learners' high levels of intrinsic motivation (Lamont, 2011, p. 380; Taylor, 2011, p.351; Hobbs, 2014, p. 20) but find that some struggle with "unrealistic expectations" (Taylor, 2011, p. 358). There are also "business issues" (Bowles, 2010, p. 56) around scheduling and cancelling lessons, and "making time to practise" (Taylor, 2011, p. 358).

Family and friends are a strong influence, including "the encouragement of friends [as] catalysts" to taking up or returning to music (Taylor, 2011, p. 345) and the importance of ongoing support from family and friends (Taylor, 2011, p. 351). Adult learners often show "a high level of trust and appreciation of teachers encountered in adulthood" (Pitts, 2012, p. 143). The ideal teacher has "an understanding of the wide range of responsibilities handled by adults, along with a steady insistence that students be challenged" (Roulston et al., 2015, p. 331). However, many teachers "lack confidence in dealing with a different kind of teaching challenge" (Hobbs, 2014, p. 20). Bowles (2010, p. 56) finds that 67% of music teachers would like specific training in teaching adults. This is supported by my own survey of music teachers which found that many considered teaching adults as "a separate skill" to teaching younger learners (Shirley, 2015, p. 9).

In summary, whilst these small-scale studies complement each other, there is a lack of large-scale research into adult learners. Most existing research is predominantly qualitative, involving interviews, autobiographical writing or questionnaire responses. These methods allow for "a greater degree of respondents' own interpretations" (Pitts, 2014, p. 192), influenced by the fact they are taking part in a research project, and they are also clearly subject to interpretation by researchers.

Although much existing research produces and uses textual data, there has been little use of linguistic analysis. In section 2b I discuss corpus-based discourses analysis techniques which allow large textual data sets to be analysed and enable the use of anonymised data not specifically elicited for research purposes, potentially revealing different aspects of adult learners' 'stories'.

Data & methodology

Corpus-based discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, the approach that "choice of words expresses an ideological position" (Stubbs, cited in Baker 2006, p. 47), is particularly suited to investigating the use of language to express identities and attitudes. Recent developments in discourse analysis include the use of corpus-based techniques, using software to enable the analysis of larger data sets than could be handled 'manually'. Since patterns are identified by running searches and automated reports, these approaches potentially lessen the problem of researcher bias and subjective interpretation. Widdowson (1998, p. 148) describes corpus-based analyses as "grounded in systematic language description" seeing this as preferable to less structured approaches. However, as Baker (2006, p. 92) points out, corpus-based discourse analysis "is still a matter of interpretation… subject to the researcher's own ideological stance".

Corpus approaches are particularly suited to online texts. Computer-mediated communication can produce large quantities of text in a short period of time, and building a corpus offers a way to analyse this data and identify patterns in the text.

Corpus linguistics techniques are increasingly crossing over into other discipline areas, for example in the interdisciplinary work of the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) which includes projects on online misogyny[1], language education[2], healthcare (e.g. Semino et al., 2015), and geography[3]. As yet, music education research has barely used these techniques, with only one published study using corpus-based discourse analysis (Mantie, 2012).

Data

The data for this study consists of a 500,000-word corpus of text posted online by adult music learners between January 2010 and April 2015. In order to compile a corpus of these postings, I searched for relevant web sites where adult learners describe and discuss their experiences of learning music. I downloaded webpages as plain text files, and removed extraneous text such as web page headings.

Ethical considerations

Using online data raises ethical issues, primarily:

- Expectations of 'participants' – although site contents are public there is a sense of a private community/ anonymity. It is important to consider whether the data "you want to study is publicly available and perceived as such by the participants" (Page, Barton, Unger & Zappavigna, 2014, p. 72). NatCen Social Research, exploring users' views on social media research, found that participants were aware of this 'sense of anonymity' but also displayed 'self-regulation' – they "only posted online what they were happy for others to access" (2014, p. 20).

- Would informing 'participants' constitute interfering in this community or change the nature of postings? NatCen Social Research found that participants felt that "their answer will be influenced by the fact that they… know someone else is going to read [it]" (2014, p. 20). Meanwhile, Tusting (in Page et al., 2014, p. 77) found resistance from forum site owners to "post[ing] a thread to open up a conversation about my research."

My solution to these concerns was to use the data entirely anonymously. I felt that making an announcement or contacting site users would constitute interference – as well as influencing what people posted, it could, more importantly, disrupt communities that members see as a source of support. I do not identify the sites used, and quotations do not include personal or identifying information. In order to ensure that only publicly available data was used, I downloaded text without logging in.

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[1] http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/?page_id=1022
[2] http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/?page_id=1327
[3] http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/spatialhum

Analysis

I analysed the corpus using AntConc[4] which can produce word lists (by frequency), concordances and collocate lists, with some statistical analysis. The word list showed that *teacher* was the 6th most frequent term in the corpus, suggesting prominent discourses around teachers.

I use corpus searches as a starting point for discourse analysis, in particular analysis of metaphor use, finding recurrence of "different expressions relating to the same broad source domain" (Semino, 2008, p. 22) – groups of related metaphors which represent how experiences are being described.

Adult learners and music teachers

Teacher(s) occurs 2785 times in the corpus. In order to investigate how teachers are described, I used AntConc to search for collocates of *teacher** - words frequently co-occurring with *teacher* or *teachers.* The parameters I used were as follows:

Span: 5L, 5R – includes words five places to the left and right of *exam** - I chose this wide span in order to capture a broad view of how adult learners describe exams, as this span includes pronouns, adjectives, intensifiers and verbs around the word being investigated.

Minimum collocate frequency: one (since even words used just once or twice may be part of a group of terms which represent a particular discourse, or may be significant as a 'dissenting voice').

Sort order: I sorted results by frequency, and also by MI ('mutual information') score. This statistical measure identifies words which occur more frequently than would normally be expected, which is useful for identifying patterns specific to these texts.

In the full corpus, *teacher** occurs 2785 times, and a collocate search shows 2267 collocates.

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[4] Downloaded from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html

Table 1. Top thirty collocates of *teacher** in order of frequency

Rank	Word	Frequency	MI score
1	tempting	7	8.77071
2	horrified	6	9.77071
3	unfailingly	4	8.77071
4	maternity	3	9.35567
5	hampering	3	9.35567
6	vibe	3	8.77071
7	tenterhooks	3	8.77071
8	treasure	2	8.77071
9	topped	2	8.77071
10	stunningly	2	8.77071
11	wows	1	8.77071
12	whinge	1	8.77071
13	vinyl	1	8.77071
14	unlucky	1	8.77071
15	tweaks	1	8.77071
16	treats	1	8.77071
17	toys	1	8.77071
18	thrilled	1	8.77071
19	thanking	1	8.77071
20	temper	1	8.77071
21	teatime	1	8.77071
22	swapped	1	8.77071
23	surmise	1	8.77071
24	stumped	1	8.77071
25	stray	1	8.77071
26	stilted	1	8.77071
27	steadier	1	8.77071
28	stacks	1	8.77071
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13	toys	1	8.77071
14	topped	2	8.77071
15	thrilled	1	8.77071
16	thanking	1	8.77071
17	tenterhooks	3	8.77071
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As **tables 1** and **2** show, an intriguing mixture of terms appear in association with *teacher**. Sorting both by frequency and by MI score shows some strongly negative words – *horrified, hampering, whinge, unlucky* – and some strongly positive – *wows, treasure, thanking* – ranking highly.

As MI score highlights terms which are particular to this text, I used the top 1000 collocates sorted by MI, to more fully investigate terms associated with teachers. These could be categorised mainly into three groups:

- Emotions/ feelings
- Verbal processes

- Metaphors

The analysis below focuses on metaphorical language.

Metaphors

The metaphorical language apparent in collocates of *teacher** falls mainly into three groups - violence, injury and pain; metaphors of war; metaphors of religion.

Violence, injury and pain

Collocates of *teacher** include a number of metaphors of violent actions: *force, push, pushing, pushed, pushes, pounced, knocks, struck, torn, inflict, flogging, murdering, whip, shreds, struck, chucking* (some of these terms occur several times, making 38 tokens in total).

Many of these refer to actions by or attitudes of teachers, for example:

> 'my teacher pounced on my least favourite out of them'
> 'torn to shreds by your teacher'
> 'my teacher started to force me into weekly lessons'
> 'I wanted an easy lesson but my teacher pushed me over the edge'

These imply that some learners find their teachers slightly 'scary'. This idea 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'. Equally there are instances which suggest that learners appreciate teachers' direction, with one learner stating 'I'm glad my teacher pushes me so hard'.

Some terms refer to actions by the learners themselves:

> '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'.

It seems that learners feel that playing 'badly' is somehow injurious to their teacher or to the piece of music itself.

There are also terms referring to pain and injury (7 tokens): *pains, bleed, dead, innards*. One of these turns out to refer to a real injury, where the learner didn't want 'to bleed on my teacher's piano' and another is a description of violin playing, referring to 'cat gut' strings – 'a cat's innards!'. The others are used metaphorically:

> 'my teacher was at pains to explain that'
> 'feel like I'm flogging a dead horse, my teacher suggests…'

These metaphors of violence and pain suggest that the learner/ teacher relationship can be difficult and learners can see their teachers' actions and their own limitations in quite severe terms.

War metaphors

Several metaphors (14 tokens) could fit into a 'war' theme - *battling, conflicting, lost, revenge, reinforcement* - overlapping with that of violence and injury. In the same way that learners depict themselves as 'murdering' pieces of music, there is a sense of fighting with difficult pieces, e.g.: 'my teacher has me battling with [a particular piece of music]'.

The use of 'my teacher has me' is especially interesting here, the image of the teacher 'sending the learner into battle' suggesting that the teacher is in control. Conversely, *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'.

Religion

A number of collocates of *teacher** are religion-related terms: *angel, saint, saints, faith, spirit, soul, believes, praise* (24 tokens). Looking at these in context shows these are generally used in fairly conventional metaphorical ways such as 'my teacher is an angel' or 'has the patience of a saint'. The use of the plural *saints* is interesting, as it comes as part of a discussion around teachers showing their frustration with students: 'I think teachers would have to be saints not to let a hint of frustration show occasionally'.

Faith is used in variations of 'my teacher has faith in me/ my abilities/ my playing', often with an implication that the teacher thinks more highly of the learner's ability than they do themselves: 'my teacher has more faith in me than I do'. Likewise, *believes* appears in the context of 'my teacher believes I can…' and *soul* is used as part of the conventional phrasing 'my teacher is the soul of diplomacy'.

The use of these religious metaphors suggest that the 'belief' and opinions of teachers are important to adult learners, and that they recognise they often do not have the same confidence in their own abilities as their teachers have (or give the impression of having). They highlight qualities which the learners appreciate – patience and diplomacy – but also somewhat place the teachers on a pedestal, contributing to the discourse of teacher control.

Conclusions

The metaphorical language evident here - couching interactions in terms of violence, war and religion - suggests that learner-teacher relationships provoke strong responses. There is a clear sense that the teacher is in control, whether that is expressed through negative (war or violence) terms or more positive terms of admiration (religious metaphors). Learners appreciate support, patience and understanding from teachers, want to impress and please them, and feel ashamed of 'not doing well'. It appears that learners appreciate some aspects of teaching which might seem initially negative, such

as 'strictness' and teachers making the decisions, but do seem to be issues around the balance of control between teacher and learner.

These findings have the potential to inform music educators, influencing individual teachers, music education training, and organisations who are seeking to engage with and support adults.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation to this study is that it excludes those who do not contribute to online content. It is also difficult to ascertain 'tone of voice' - unlike an interview situation, there is no opportunity to ask for clarification from participants. It could also be argued that the problems associated with biographical research approaches apply here – learners may 'self-edit' and present a particular identity online. These issues suggest that a combined approach may be useful, incorporating corpus-based analysis with traditional music education research techniques such as questionnaires or interviews.

AntConc, whilst far easier than manual searching, does have limited functionality. Corpus tools with part-of-speech and semantic tagging and more statistical analysis options would enable easier investigation of aspects such as passivisation, modality and transitivity in the text.

Potential for further research

Corpus-based analysis has the potential to contribute to a truly in-depth study of adult learners. It would be useful to investigate whether there are varying discourses amongst different groups of adult learners, for example taught versus self-taught learners or beginners versus returners, and to compare discourses in text written by music teachers.

These techniques could equally be applied in other areas of music education research, giving insights which could benefit educators, organisations and, most importantly, learners.

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