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The linguistic demands of workplace learning: Power and miscommunication in vocational training interactions

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1. Discourse practices and vocational education

This paper addresses issues related to specific domains of education studies that pertain to what is commonly referred to as initial vocational, education and training (VET). It focuses on apprenticeship programs in the context of Switzerland, where the dominant form of training consists of a complex combination of school-based and practice-based learning. According to such a "dual" training system, apprentices experience a plurality of training sites. They move back and forth between vocational schools or training centres, where they are introduced to both technical and general contents, and ordinary workplaces, where they acquire practical skills and encounter the specific requirements of work production tasks. For a long time, and even recently, apprenticeship programs following the scheme of the dual system have recurrently been reported as efficient strategies for securing employment and supporting smooth transitions from school to work (cf. Dubs, 2006, Gonon 2005, OPET 2009).

In this particular context, the paper proposes to investigate the place and role of language and discourse in the ways initial vocational education practices are being enacted in context. Interestingly, when communicating with vocational trainers, teachers, managers or policy makers, "language" is often regarded as a limited or even narrow issue, related almost exclusively to specific contents of teaching and learning and associated mainly with the classroom context. For most apprenticeship programs available at upper secondary level, the curriculum indeed includes first and second language teaching sessions. However, language use is rarely regarded as being involved in other areas of the curriculum and exerting a more global influence on the conditions under which apprentices encounter learning experiences in and across the various contexts in which they are trained. To most practitioners in the field, the social visibility of language seems to be limited to the classroom context and remains external to the workplace. Yet, the complex processes that shape learning through practice are very much premised on language use and communication. Training and learning occur in ordinary activities, in which individuals provide or receive instructions, share views, solve problems, display interpretations or evaluations of others' conducts, etc. In other words, learning to work and
becoming a member of professional communities very much relies on discourse and social interactions (Billett cf. 2001a, 2001b, 2009).

Following this argument, the paper advances a new perspective for approaching the role of language and discourse in VET, a perspective that sees these ingredients not as peripheral components of the training curriculum, but rather as central mediating tools for vocational learning. According to this perspective, apprentices are not only exposed to vocational knowledge in the range of contexts in which training takes place. They also encounter specific discourse practices and face numerous and often implicit or invisible expectations regarding the ways these discourse practices may be enacted and conducted. It is by engaging with these discourse practices that apprentices gain access to knowledge, develop practical skills and may endorse legitimate social positions within the multiple communities they belong to during their training (cf. Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). These language and communication skills are neither transparent nor self-evident. Like other components of vocational training, they have to be seen and most importantly learnt. Obviously, some apprentices are very successful in identifying and acquiring the specific discursive formats underlying the range of practices included in their training program. Some others are not and may encounter rather challenging experiences in their journey to a VET qualification.

From this perspective, the paper reflects on the challenges and difficulties met by apprentices with a migrant background when joining the workplace at the beginning of their training program. These challenges include: How do apprentices access vocational knowledge and build up skills and competencies in the workplace? How do they become members of professional communities and cope with identity transformations? How are they guided through this experience and supported by expert workers? These issues are not external to language use and communication. Analysing discourse and verbal interaction among apprentices, trainers and workers, can contribute to a better understanding of the complex learning processes associated with transitions from school to work and illuminate the multiple challenges faced by apprentices at the beginning of their training programs.

2. Researching teaching and learning in VET

These relations between vocational education research and linguistics methods and approaches have been investigated in a recent research program initiated in 2005 together with two colleagues at the University of Geneva (cf. Filliettaz 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b; Filliettaz, de Saint-Georges & Duc 2008, 2010). This research program was sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and aimed to understand teaching and learning processes as they are enacted in practice within the Swiss dual VET system.

The objectives and research questions followed three lines of investigation. The first line of investigation focused on apprentices and the learning strategies they engage in. Vocational learning was approached from a broad perspective, including both cognitive and social dimensions (cf. Billett 2001a; Lave & Wenger 1991). On a cognitive level, the project aimed to understand how apprentices gain access to knowledge and skills in the various activities they encounter in their training programs. And on a social level, it was also interested in the ways apprentices experience identity transformations during their apprenticeship. The second line of investigation focused on teachers, trainers and the great variety of professional engaged with apprentices in the various contexts of their training. From that perspective, the research program aimed at identifying the kinds of skills required to teach and train apprentices in these various sites where training occurs. And finally, a third line of investigation focused on the training curriculum and reflected on efficiency and effectiveness of a dual training system. The research questions we addressed from this perspective were twofold. First, we wanted to understand how a 'dual' training model is not only implemented but also experienced by trainers and apprentices? And second, we wanted to stress both the potentialities and limitations associated with such a practice-based training model.

It is through the lens of verbal and non-verbal interactions between apprentices and trainers that issues of vocational training were being investigated in our research program. The methodology we selected draws upon conceptual and analytic categories from various fields of linguistics, such as conversation analysis (cf. Goodwin 2000; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1978; Schegloff 2007), interactional sociolinguistics (cf. Gumperz 1982), politeness theories (cf. Goffman 1959; Brown & Levinson 1987) and multimodal discourse analysis (cf. Kress et al. 2001; Levine & Scollon 2004). These fields have explored multiple avenues of linguistics and are often seen as offering competing or contradictory frameworks for analysing discourse and interaction. Nevertheless, these frameworks also share common assumptions about language and social life. In particular, they view language not only as a way of transferring information from speakers to recipients, but also as a historical and culturally shaped medium through which individuals take actions, achieve cooperation, participate in social events, align identities, etc.

Consistent with this broad linguistic perspective, specific kinds of data were collected for this research program. Data collection was conducted in the form of a global ethnographic observation of a cohort of approximately forty apprentices engaged in three different technical trades: 1) car mechanics, 2) automation and 3) electric assembly. Observation took place in naturally
occurring training conditions in the Geneva area. With the consent of participants, observations were video-recorded by the researchers. The complete data set comprises 150 hours of audio-video recordings collected in one vocational school, two training centres and seven different training companies. These recordings document sequences of everyday training and work activities in which apprentices interact with a variety of experts, ranging from vocational teachers, dedicated trainers or experienced co-workers.

3. Joining the workplace: a case study

It is an illustration of these data I wish to provide now by turning to a case study. The case study relates to one of the apprentices we followed at various times and in different training sites during his apprenticeship program. Rodney (the pseudonym we gave to this young man) commenced an automation apprentice in September 2005. At that time, he was already 18 years old. ROD exemplifies a rather typical profile of the population that enrols in "dual" apprenticeship programs in Geneva. He has a migrant background and emigrated from Cape Verde to Switzerland when he was a young boy. ROD encountered significant difficulties during his schooling and ended compulsory education with poor achievements in both literacy and numeracy. The training company that hired ROD as an apprentice is a small business that specializes in the construction of electric boards for the building industry. Within the company, ROD was under the supervision of Fernando (FER), his vocational trainer. As is usually the case, Fernando was not dedicated exclusively to the instruction of apprentices. He was also manager of one of the workshops and contributed to productive work tasks. Other colleagues were also working in the same environment as ROD, but they had no official training responsibility for apprentices. The training model followed by this company was strongly guided by productive concerns and considered that apprentices should learn by being assigned productive tasks from the very beginning of their apprenticeship program. Consequently, ROD had not been given any period of observation during which he could become familiar with the context of production. Instead, he assisted expert workers in their ordinary tasks and was immediately put to work.

These conditions did not fit ROD's needs for more guided training. After the end of the second year of his apprenticeship, in June 2007, the company decided to end ROD's contract when he failed his intermediary exams. His trainer considered that ROD was not motivated enough and required too much assistance to be a helpful resource for the team. As an alternative, ROD could continue his apprenticeship through a full-time school program in the same trade. These conditions seemed to be more suitable and enabled ROD to complete his apprenticeship program in June 2011.

4. The data: Engraving plastic tags

To address these questions, I propose to use a short sequence of interaction recorded during our observations. This video excerpt was recorded in March 2006, six months after the commencement of ROD's apprenticeship, and at the very beginning of ROD's training period in this company. At that time, ROD learnt how to produce small-sized electric boards by assembling various electric devices including circuit breakers, contactors and electric terminals. In the following sequence, ROD is desperately trying to engrave plastic tags that have to be attached to the front of an electric board. To engrave these tags, ROD has to run specific software on a computer located in a room adjacent to the workshop. It is the second time he has gone through this engraving procedure and he is doing this task on his own for the first time. ROD is facing difficulties in running the software properly and, repeatedly, requests assistance from his colleagues. In the following sequence, ROD steps out of the computer room and asks FER, his official trainer, for help. It is finally JUL, another colleague, who will assist ROD in this engraving procedure.²

(I) I have a problem! It doesn't work (227, 11'20 - 12'30)
1. ROD: (ROD leaves the computer room and goes back to the workshop)
2. ROD: I have a problem. It doesn't work.
3. FER: Of course it doesn't work! It can only function!
4. FER: You go JUL, I've had enough!
5. JUL: What's the problem now?
6. ROD: Are those the T-shirts?
7. JUL: Yes these are the T-shirts. ((moves towards the computer room))
8. JUL: And what's your problem then?
9. ROD: It doesn't work.
10. JUL: What's the problem? What doesn't work? What's-
11. ROD: I don't know it says this all the time.

²The recorded data are in French, and the transcript provides an English translation.
5. Observable difficulties

Given this short transcript of interaction involving ROD, his trainer and other colleagues, I will point out some of the challenges faced by the apprentice in this work environment and thus illustrate the mediating role of language and discourse in vocational learning.

5.1. Reshaping participation and asking for assistance

The first difficulty relates to the conditions in which the apprentice asks for assistance and the impact of this request on the enactment of the work activities. Let us observe in detail how ROD displays help-seeking behaviours at the beginning of this excerpt and how his trainer responds to these behaviours.

Being unable to complete the editing procedure on his own, ROD has to reshape how he participates in workplace activities. He does so by changing his orientation in space and by initiating a verbal exchange with his trainer: “I have a problem. It doesn’t work” (l. 2). The linguistic form associated with this request deserves particular attention. ROD uses numerous attenuation devices when asking for assistance. The production of his request is linguistically presented as an assertion (“I have a problem”) and remains highly implicit. And the encountered problem is described as being caused by the computer (“It doesn’t work”) and not by its user. So it appears that ROD is taking numerous precautions in order to perform what seems to be anticipated as a highly face-threatening speech act (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987).

The type of reaction displayed by the trainer in response to this implicit request confirms the face-threatening potential associated with ROD’s help-request. In a first turn, FER replies sarcastically to ROD’s request, reminding him that he is using inappropriate vocabulary for describing the problem: The computer cannot “work”; it can only “function”. In a second turn, FER initiates a new exchange addressed to his colleague JUL and asks him to respond to the apprentice (‘You go JUL I’ve had enough”, l. 4). In doing so, he is not immediately satisfying ROD request for help, but instead displays explicit resistance to engage with the apprentice at this stage.

This example stresses the idea that help-seeking behaviours are complex communicative tasks in the workplace, related not so much to access to specific information but rather to deep changes in the ways workers participate in the workplace (cf. Filliettaz, 2011a). Indeed, ROD’s request not only orients towards a verbal answer. It requires that his trainer or other colleagues interrupt their own productive tasks in order to enact specific training roles. In other terms, asking for assistance introduces multitasking in highly constrained local organizations of collective activities. For an apprentice to initiate such changes in the context is not an easy task for him, particularly when these requests for assistance are repeated over a short period of time.

5.2. Referring to the work environment

Another challenge often faced by apprentices when joining the workplace deals with reference to the work environment. When engaging in practices they are not familiar with, apprentices sometimes lack linguistic resources to refer accurately to objects or processes related to the work environment. This is because their conceptual, procedural and dispositional knowledge of workplace practices is at an early stage of elaboration, which makes it difficult for apprentices to enact and display what has sometimes been termed a “professional vision” of the environment (cf. Goodwin 1994).

This type of difficulty becomes apparent in our data when ROD tries to explain the “problem” he is facing with the engraving procedure. Interestingly, there seems to be clear expectations from JUL that the apprentice should be able to describe accurately the problem he is encountering. In three successive turns, JUL inquires about the nature of the problem (“What’s the problem NOW”, l. 5; “and what’s your problem then”, l. 8; “WHAT’s the problem WHAT doesn’t work” l. 10). But obviously, ROD is not in a position to satisfy these insistent requests. He reports that “there is a problem” and that “it doesn’t work”, but cannot explain precisely WHAT does not work. It is only when reaching the computer room and standing in front of the screen
that ROD is finally able to use the material resources afforded by the environment and to point to the problem: "It says this all the time" (L. 11).

There is another instance later on in this same excerpt where similar issues occur. When taking control of the computer and the engraving procedure, JUL wonders why ROD has not listed the complete range of numbers on the plastic tags ("and why didn't you do it all at the same time?", L. 17). In questioning so, he invites the apprentice to give justifications for his way of engraving the tags. ROD explains that he has not included all the numbers because he does not know how to deal with specific sorts of circuit breakers. EFI breakers in particular ("Because there are some EFI breakers here and I don't know how to deal with that", L. 18). But this justification seems to be regarded as insufficient, considering JUL's renewed enquiry ("Right but 8-9-10 what's that?" L. 19). So here again, the apprentice is being put in a situation where he has to provide linguistic accounts of his work and faces difficulties to share with his colleagues a common understanding of the practices in which he is engaging.

5.3. Delivering instruction in the workplace

Other difficulties observable in this short excerpt relate to the specific ways instructions may be delivered in the work context. Unlike extended explanations as they can be expanded upon in the school context, instructions in the workplace are often concise, implicit and tightly related to productive tasks. From what we can observe here, ROD seems to have difficulties in retaining knowledge delivered in such forms. This is apparent when JUL observes that the encountered problem is similar to the one he just solved a couple of minutes ago: "It's like last time, you have too many layers. You have to delete them, you see?" (L. 14). ROD confesses that he forgets this task all the time (L. 15) and JUL then makes clear that he is well aware of that "because this is the second time he's had to come here" (L. 16).

The reasons why ROD faces problems in retaining instruction in the context may be related to the specific ways these instructions are provided by JUL. Like previously, JUL is not really assisting ROD in his task, but rather taking control of the procedure and acting in substitution of the apprentice. In such conditions, ROD participates in the procedure as an observer and not as an active "doer" of the work.

Finally, another issue often raised by instructions in the workplace is their problematic temporal alignment with the ongoing process of work. Instructing takes time and may conflict with other tasks and priorities as they shape work environments. This is what happens at the end of the excerpt, when JUL postpones additional explanation about the engraving procedure to an unclear future: "Right I'll explain this to you another time" (L. 21). He then makes the choice to set the parameter on the computer on his own, before going back to the workshop and leaving ROD alone in the computer room.

5.4. Doing relational work

All the different microscopic speech acts I have pointed to here have in common the fact that they convey important social implications for the apprentice and the ways he is being regarded by his colleagues. In sociolinguistic terms, they are the product of the ongoing "relational work" by which participants build rapport in interaction. FER and JUL are not only exchanging information with ROD and assisting him in the performance of work procedures. They are also displaying attitudes towards the apprentice and the specific ways he engages in the context. They respond with sarcasm to his requests, express explicit resistance towards his needs for assistance. "Of course it cannot work. It can only function!", "I've had enough!", "What's the problem now?", "It's the second time I've had to come here": all these speech acts affect the relational climate in which ROD is evolving and contribute to establish a rather negative image of the apprentice in the workplace. When repeated over time, these devices may lead to a progressive marginalisation of the apprentice, and, in ROD's case, to the non-recognition of his status as a legitimate learning worker within this specific community (cf. Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

6. Concluding remarks and practical implications

These elements of the case study are of course very local and highly contextualized. Much more data should be taken into consideration to understand why and most importantly how ROD's immersion into the work context failed and led to a reorientation of his training trajectory. However, these local observations enable us to reflect on the numerous and complex linguistic demands that shape workplace contexts for migrant apprentices.

These challenges can be seen as a matter of "discourse" and not strictly as a matter of "language". They go beyond the mastery of technical terms and a professional lexicon. Apprentices are expected to elaborate complex discourse practices such as "asking for assistance", "explaining a problem" or "bringing justifications to ones' activities". These challenges are also a matter of participation in interaction. Apprentices have to learn how to take part in interaction, how to coordinate with other workers, how to reshape the interaction frame. And finally, these challenges also include "power issues" and relational skills. Our case study illustrates how difficult it may be for apprentices to secure knowledge in productive conditions and to position themselves within work teams. As shown in the data, trainers and experienced workers exert various forms of power over apprentices. They
shape the ways apprentices take part in productive tasks, they orient their perceptions and understandings of the material environment, and they provide negative evaluations as responses to their requests for assistance. On the one hand, these actions can be regarded as rather benign realities consistent with workplace cultures and inherent to professional lives (cf. Holmes & Stubbe 2003). But on the other hand, these practices also reveal the multiple and contradictory expectations set towards apprentices, in a context where they are often considered more as workers than legitimate learners.

Finally, the kind of methodological approach briefly introduced and illustrated here also has important practical implications for practitioners and policy makers. Based on rich naturally occurring data, this approach enables us to elaborate findings that have established problematic work experiences and relational difficulties in the workplace as important causes leading to attrition and drop out in the Swiss context. 20% to 40% of apprentices do not complete their apprenticeship within the initial terms of their contract (cf. Lamamra & Masdonati 2009; Stalder 2008; Stalder & Nägele 2011). Illuminating the linguistic demands of the workplace may shed light on the fine-grained interactional processes by which these relational difficulties and challenges are enacted in practice.

This later observation requires a renewed approach to language use in vocational education, an approach in which language is not only regarded as a disciplinary "content" of teaching and learning related to classrooms and to specific areas of the curriculum, but also as a more global "resource" through which various sorts of learning occur. From the short excerpt of data analysed, it becomes apparent that what is meant to learn in the workplace does not come down to vocational knowledge exclusively, but also includes specific discourse patterns by which professional practice may be adequately mediated. ROD is not only learning how to engrave plastic tags in this sequence. He is also being prompted towards adequate ways of asking for assistance, providing justifications, explaining problems, etc. In other terms, he is being taught at the same time how to work and how work may be interactionally produced in discourse.

This important dimension of the curriculum deserves to be made more visible in the field of vocational education and, particularly, for trainers themselves. One particularly promising avenue currently being explored by our team is to use the empirical material collected during our research in the context of training programs addressed to vocational trainers (cf. Filliettaz 2012). As shown by the case study, vocational trainers in the workplace play an active role in the transition process experienced by apprentices. Research results presented here show an urgent need to increase the level of pedagogical qualification and awareness of trainers in the workplace to enhance the overall quality of the guidance provided in training companies. Applying a linguistic lens to empirical data certainly does not solve the complex issue of attrition in apprenticeship programs. However, it can bring visibility to the sorts of difficulties faced by apprentices when joining the workplace and it can also help trainers and experienced workers to become more reflective about their role in assisting these apprentices for accomplishing consistent transitions into working lives.

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