

I ain't no academic: an exploration of how to better engage plumbing learners in the study of language

Introduction

Albert Einstein famously said that “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results”. Yet learners who enrol at a Further Education (FE) institution without having previously acquired a GCSE in English at school, are then taught the same curriculum content, which can very closely reflect their school experience. To expect a different outcome from them is to assume that the learning content was flawless but the learner did not measure up. However, I would like to consider the contrary; that the learner was competent but the curriculum content was mis-guided.

This research study aims to explore plumbing learners' genuine experiences of studying GCSE English at an FE college to better understand why disengagement with formal modes of study is so common and to analyse whether engagement can be increased by introducing more socially situated literacies into language activities.

Capturing a true learner perspective is of paramount importance to the validity of this study. To that end, I want this research project to feel like a natural process to the participants and that our time spent together throughout this process will provide a safe space where they can express their views on studying language in an honest, candid way. The study aims to create an environment where these learners can discuss what language means to them, the mode of literacy that they enjoy engaging with or relate to, and how those more socially situated literacies could offer them an opportunity to engage with language more freely in an educational setting.

It became clear to me very early on in this study that for disenfranchised learners to meaningfully study language, they must re-discover something about language that interests them and re-connect with language on their terms, through a literacy that is familiar to them. Often, these students come to FE from a school experience that labelled them, or implied that they were ‘not academic’. It might be argued that this is a symptom of the enduring academic vocational divide that is entrenched in the UK education system, as highlighted by Bathwater et al (2018: p. 55) whilst discussing how some “policy proposals are intent on creating a binary divide between academic and vocational education pathways.”

This re-connection with language is a re-connection with what they had previously estranged themselves from in order to ‘survive’ in a school system that did not cater for their intellect or skill set, and is, I would suggest, imperative to establish before they can once again study language in a way that will nurture their development.

Literature review

“If they give you a random text or something, you just want to get the work done. You don’t really care, you’ll hand in whatever”.

Tiago, Plumbing learner

The quote above was shared by a Plumbing learner studying GCSE English, and refers to his dissatisfaction with the text he had been asked to analyse. This is representative of the problem at hand that many learners are facing. This ‘random’ text could have been classic literature that is universally respected and admired but to Thiago, the text was lacking in meaning and set in an incongruous context.

Cope and Kalantzis (2014) tell us that:

“Texts are different because they do different things. So, any literacy pedagogy has to be concerned, not just with the formalities of how texts work, but also with the living social reality of texts-in-use”

(Cope and Kalantzis, 2014: p. 7)

This advocates for the importance of considering the ‘living social reality’ not only of the text in use, but also of the reader and suggests that the need to be able to relate some aspect of our own social reality to what we read, watch on television or listen to in music, is vital to our engagement in the medium and the language used in it. Considering this, perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that disengagement with language amongst FE learners is so common, if the content doesn’t reflect the world they live in or the relevance it may or may not have to our learners’ social reality.

Zimmerman’s (2015) Hermeneutics concurs on the importance of the learners being able to correlate the relevance of a text to their cultural experiences:

“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”

(Zimmerman 2015: p. 51)

Learners need to be able to relate to a text before they can fully engage with it and produce meaningful work from it. Whilst discussing the rigidity of certain educational curricula, Biesta (2018) presents us with an “Educational ‘diet’: perhaps effective in terms of what can be measured but not very nourishing” (2018: p. 11). Recall Thiago’s dissatisfaction with the learning content he was supplied. He and the three other level one plumbers who make up the case study of this research project- all malnourished consumers of this educational ‘diet’. Throughout their vocational course, these learners have demonstrated they can read well, but lose interest when the reading doesn’t speak to them about their lives. They’re all capable of producing interesting, thoughtful and impressive written work but lack motivation when asked to

write about what they may view as an insignificant subject. They all enjoy language, even though they may not always realise this themselves, but the type of language they enjoy doesn't necessarily align with the prescribed 'menu' of the English GCSE curricula.

However, to suggest that all GCSE English curriculum content is misplaced would be unreasonable. After all, a text that is exciting, relatable and poignant to one individual may be irrelevant and mundane to the next. It simply comes down to a matter of taste and/ or life experience. This contemplation leads me to the concept of a 'Fusion of Horizons' as outlined in Zimmerman's (2016) Hermeneutics:

"Fusion of Horizons: This describes the nature of understanding as integrating what is unfamiliar to use into our own familiar context, so when we understand something we fuse someone else's viewpoint with our own and in this encounter we are transformed because it broadens our mind."

(Zimmerman, 2016)

The idea of a 'Fusion of Horizons' has been a recurring inspiration throughout this study as it deals with the theory of taking something unfamiliar to a learner and putting it into a familiar context to 'fuse' your (or the author of the text's) 'horizon' with theirs. Thus, opening up a new world of literature and language to learners, if we as teachers are able to successfully communicate the context of an excerpt from a book into a context that the learner can relate to and engage with. It also implies that none of us think on a horizon that is unique. Concepts that we are not familiar with can be understood, comprehended and used meaningfully when related to our own life experience. In this way, the idea of 'fusing' our minds with the minds of our learners could establish an encounter where we are both transformed, in some way. In that, we learn from our students as they learn from us. Potentially, what we learn might be; how to reach them and engage them better.

None of this is to suggest that the failings of an FE education in language is the fault of English teachers. I personally know many English teachers who work tirelessly to create engaging, thought provoking lessons. Perhaps the issue with engaging plumbing learners in the study of language runs deeper than what one teacher does compared to another. I would like to consider the possibility that the curriculum is devised too narrowly and focuses too heavily on preparing students to merely 'function' in the world of work, as suggested in J.P Gee's (1996) commodity myth:

"literacy = functional literacy = skills necessary to function in "today's job market" = market economy = the market = the economy... Literacy is measured out and quantified, like time, work and money [...] We match jobs with "literacy skills" and skills with "economic needs". Literacy, thus, becomes intertranslatable with time, work, money, part of "the economy" ...a commodity that can be measured, and thence bought and sold".

(Gee 1996 p. 122-123)

The commodity myth concept presents us with a stark, almost Orwellian reality of how an educational programme can become a product. Something to be measured, bought and sold. Far from the idyllic 'Fusion of Horizons' and shared growth through experience. However, crucially this highlights the inflexibility that some learners may feel and may offer some answers as to why learners can find it difficult to fully express themselves through language in an educational environment.

Coffield and Williamson (2012) suggest that failing to find answers to these questions:

“results in a valuation of human beings that is essentially utilitarian. People become valuable as ‘human capital’ or ‘human resources’, not as citizens with human rights who are capable of showing each other respect and understanding. They are encouraged to develop new skills to serve the purposes of others, not new ways of understanding themselves and changing their world.”

(Coffield and Williamson 2012 p. 18)

Once again, we are encouraged to look beyond how language can serve a learner purely as a functional survival tool and delve into the potential new horizons and journeys of self-discovery that await if we can present them with an education that allows them to 'change their world'. Perhaps the first step towards providing learners with an education that could enable them to change their world, is to prepare lessons that come from their world. A context they understand and a voice of familiarity. Or, as Zimmerman (2015) more succinctly puts it- “The reason we understand anything at all is because we already stand *in it*” (2015: p. 40).

Research Methodology/ What I plan To Do

To capture the experiences of the four student participants and view this problem through their perspective, this study employs a range of qualitative research methods.

The mainstay of this is our monthly focus group. This session provides myself and the learners an opportunity to reflect on our recent experiences of studying and/ or using language and is proving a valuable outlet and safe space for these learners to discuss this topic together, openly and honestly. The focus groups are then complimented by regular semi-structured interviews which are allowing me to delve deeper into the specific mode of language that each learner enjoys engaging with.

During these semi-structured interviews, learners share responses to questions such as; “What interests you about that language in particular? What interests you about that theme?” and “When you hear something like this or you read words like these, and you know you can relate your own life experience to them, how does that make you feel?”.

I also employ monthly reviews designed to capture my learners on-going perceptions of studying language. These reviews track my learners' attendance levels in GCSE English throughout the academic year and their overall level of engagement in English lessons.

Considering one of the key focal points of this study is to experiment with using socially situated literacies instead of, or alongside formal literacies in the study of language, I have set my learners English language PEE (point, evidence, explanation) tasks, featuring an excerpt of language of their choosing. My aim in setting these tasks is to enable me an opportunity to triangulate information from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, with the physical work completed by the learners on the PEE tasks, back to regular discussions I am having with their English teacher. These discussions seek to provide an opportunity to gauge how much difference, if any, the freedom of analysing and dissecting a literacy of the learners own choosing has had on their level of motivation to complete the work in a timely fashion and what impact this has had on the quality of the work they have turned in.

I am evaluating all of the above research methodology in a reflective diary that I have kept since the start of the study. This diary has enabled me to more easily assess the differences in the more comprehensive and in-depth student responses that I am now able to access compared with those at the beginning of my research.

The qualitative research methods that have been employed can be organised into three broad phases;

Phase 1: To use the early focus groups and semi-structured interviews to build a solid foundation of trust between myself and the four research participants.

Throughout this phase, my main goal is to ensure the learners feel comfortable and reassured that they are in a safe space where they can freely discuss their true experiences of studying language.

Phase 2: To allow my students to bring their own language into the process by encouraging them to share with me some examples of language that they choose to engage with in their own time.

Phase 3: To fuse some key examples of my learner's language choices with familiar GCSE English tasks to gauge the outcomes and responses of using socially situated literacies in a formal educational setting.

Ethical Considerations

Of course, ethical considerations are, and will remain at the very heart of this study, and all research project activity is being carried out in accordance with the BERA (British Education Research Association) ethical guidelines 2018.

All participants are aware of the requirements of this project and have been informed that they can opt out (BERA, 2018:18) at any stage without repercussions. All data is

stored safely, confidentially and anonymously (BERA, 2018:21) and no names or personal details will be included or pseudonyms will be used.

This project aims to be honest and open with all participants at all times to ensure that the welfare of researchers and participants is not put in jeopardy.

Although this research has been funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), the Foundation has in no way influenced the conduct of the research or its outcomes.

What I Found

In the text box below, I will give a short description of the personalities of the four student study participants.

Case Study Participants

Now it's time to get to know our case study participants a little better. Jon is a quiet character. Very capable and keen to learn but rarely talks of his accomplishments. Ben is happy-go-lucky and thrives in situations where he can work with and bounce off his peers. You may remember Thiago from above- he is intensely switched on, very intelligent but needs to be challenged, needs to be pushed. He's very sure of who he is and is not shy in voicing an opinion. Finally, there's Dinero- seemingly completely apathetic to studying language in any form but surreptitiously keen on studying song lyrics and word play in music. Again, he has no problem being forthright with how he feels.

All four learners are completely different personalities but they all have one thing in common- they are all re-sitting an English GCSE this academic year and they would all really rather not have to.

Early conversations from focus groups and semi-structured interviews featured overwhelmingly negative feedback on their experiences of studying language (see appendix item 1). Most of this negativity stemmed from their school experiences where they assumed themselves to be 'not academic' and therefore, motivation waned. However, the subsequent impact of studying language on their terms, a language they have selected to study themselves, has so far seen some of this negativity abate in favour of a slightly more sanguine disposition.

Dinero's first language of choice was an excerpt from a song by a rapper named Lil' Durk. Significant parts of the excerpt contained slang words that Dinero eagerly translated for me. Dinero quickly became more enthused about language than I imagined he could be-

"What he's saying, that's what's happening nowadays. That's what's going on with the youths and that's what's happening in

the present day. So, it interests me a lot because I can relate to it, because I know what's going on as well."

Thiago selected an excerpt from a Drake song and his response to our first PEE task was similar-

"The thought of using a song, whether that's Drake, Lil' Durk, The Weeknd, the thought of that wouldn't have even crossed my mind. When you say language, I'm thinking history, the old stuff, stuff that most of us don't read or only read because we have to and don't enjoy. Beforehand, I saw them completely separate. Comparing Drake to Shakespeare wouldn't have even crossed my mind at all but now we've done that task, I think we've all shown that it can be done, it can work."

Buoyed by these, and other positive responses (see appendix item 2) to our first PEE task, I am eager to relate back to Hermeneutics and how it may be possible to broaden a learners' horizon and generate genuine interest in the study of language by fusing a language familiar and relatable to the learner with a routine English language task. Zimmerman (2015) expresses that we are drawn into language if it "tells us something about our present human condition, with emotions and situations that are already familiar to us." (2015: p. 8)

It may be argued that this study's response to using what would be considered a more socially situated literacy has helped these learners to engage with a task they may otherwise have not done, perhaps this is because the language they analysed described emotions and situations familiar to them.

Of course, having good feedback from one or two PEE tasks doesn't mean that these learners will be forevermore engaged and enthused to study language. And some learners might see it as a ploy to hook their attention before returning to the well-worn GCSE content. Nonetheless, I would tentatively assert that socially situated literacies can and do play a vital role in forming an engagement with the study of language amongst, not only plumbing learners, but FE students in general. Whilst discussing secondary discourses, Locke (2015) considers that

"We 'acquire' rather than 'learn' a discourse because of the subconscious nature of the process, the process of trial and error and the absence of formal instruction"

(Locke 2015: p. 28)

This proposes that we may all be naturally drawn to using our own socially situated literacies wherever possible because of the natural way in which we acquired this language. It is born in our subconscious and the learning process had few or no rules connected to it, therefore it is less daunting, perhaps reassuring even. Thus, I might suggest, more conducive to generating engagement in learners.

More recent focus groups have seen a change in mentality from the participants of this case study. Although attendance in English class remained patchy for Dinero, all

four members of the focus group are showing an improvement in this area. Furthermore, language has been discussed positively, with Thiago stating “I feel like I prefer language when it’s stuff that relates to me or I feel it can relate to me and it’s not so far in the past that I see no connection at all.” But perhaps the most promising shift in attitude so far came from Dinero who remarked “I see language totally different now. It’s not only about doing paragraphs about Macbeth and stuff like that, there’s a lot more to language.”

Key Findings

At this stage of this research study, I am surprised by how quickly these learners responded once given the opportunity to discuss and analyse their choice of language. Deliberating on this further and reflecting on the numerous discussions between myself and the research participants so far, I would like to give some thought as to how much their disengagement stems from, not only disinterest in the texts, but also a fear of not being able to understand or comprehend the text in a way that they feel is expected of them. I am inclined to consider the possibility that these learners are tired of being presented with texts that are difficult for them to understand so the easiest option available to them is to disengage. Gert Biesta reminds us that “The educational gesture must remain hesitant and gentle.” (2018: p. 15).

Far from gentle educational gestures, I fear some learners may feel they are being force-fed texts, leading to a feeling of being trapped in an educational system that doesn’t cater for or consider ways to stimulate their types of intelligence. An educational system that prides itself on inclusivity in theory, but to quote Biesta again, produces “insurmountable hierarchies where few could win and many would lose.” (2018: p. 11)

Perhaps if we engage with learners more regularly via their own cultural experiences, some of the feeling of fear or being trapped may subside. Could the teaching and learning of the key GCSE curriculum become a more natural and less laborious task if the learners were able to apply to it a language that’s embedded within, and from their personal cultural context?

Recommendations

In conclusion, although encouraged by some of the positive discussions about language in the more recent focus groups, I am aware that a lot more work needs to be done in endeavouring to find lasting solutions to this problem. My primary objective in this study was to truly hear and act upon the learner voice. The importance of hearing that voice is more undeniable now than ever before. Any positive comments in focus groups or enthusiasm in completing PEE tasks that have

occurred in this study so far, have come from my implementation of what these learners suggested.

I would like to grow this study further by encouraging dis-engaged learners to consider how they perceive language by introducing other ways to embed socially-situated literacies into English language activities in an attempt to allow the learner to engage with a language that is more familiar to them and to see if this leads to an increased engagement in more functional literacies or more interest or confidence in using the type of language featured throughout the English GCSE curriculum.

Furthermore, I am keen to explore ways in which learners can relate more formal texts to their current social and cultural reality by finding similarities between those texts and more modern, relative texts that they are able to engage with more freely.

Stenhouse (1975) tells us that “It is not enough that teachers’ work is studied: they need to study it themselves” (1975: p. 143).

An assertion that inspires me to continue to analyse all aspects of my research methodology so far and to continue my pursuit in finding other approaches that may help learners to re-connect with language and attempt to deconstruct some of the long-standing barriers to learning that stand in their way.

Word count= 3843

Entire word count= 4367 (including references and appendices)

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Appendix Item 1

This appendix includes direct quotes from student participants on this study regarding their past experiences of studying language. These quotes are taken from a focus group carried out on the 15/12/2020. This focus group was recorded audibly and has since been transcribed and saved confidentially for reference.

“The slang they use, we can understand it a lot so if we were to write something about that in English we can explain it much more easily. Because, we don’t want to write about Shakespeare and poems and stuff because it doesn’t really interest us. We want to write about things that interest us.”

Ben, plumbing learner

“We don’t need to know about history or stuff that happened ages ago. We need to know about stuff that’s going on right now in the present moment.”

Dinero, plumbing learner

“With some of the stuff we do, we sometimes find it hard to explain. So, if they say ‘Evaluate this’, we might not be able to. But with other stuff, because we understand the terminology and the words, it will be much easier for us to analyse it and explain it.”

Jon, plumbing learner

“We do it because we have to do it, but like...we’re writing about stuff like when the old lady went to the shop. It’s like, do I care?”

Thiago, plumbing learner

Appendix Item 2

This appendix includes direct quotes from student participants on this study regarding their experiences of carrying out GCSE tasks that feature a language of their choice. These quotes are from focus groups and semi-structured interviews that were carried out on the 18/03/2021 and 23/03/2021. These conversations were recorded audibly and have since been transcribed and saved confidentially for reference.

“It makes it easier to write more. When you answer the questions, when you can relate to it, it makes it easier to write more about it”.

Jon, plumbing learner

“I feel like with this kind of work, I’ll still be thinking about it even when I finish college because I’ll still be listening to it when I’m at home, so I’ll understand more about it. Whereas, with other work, I don’t really care about it so I just forget about it and don’t bother with it”.

Ben, plumbing learner