Researching workplace learning from a linguistic perspective

Empirical evidence from the Swiss initial VET system

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The Swiss VET context

- Apprenticeship in the Swiss VET system (OPET, 2008)
  - Importance of initial VET programs in the Swiss education system (65%)
  - Predominance of the "dual" apprenticeship model (80%)

- Current issues and challenges
  - Difficulty in accessing apprenticeship in a “market-driven” VET system (Dubs, 2006; Gonnong, 2005; Stalder & Nägele, 2009)
    - More than 20% of all young people do not gain direct entry to upper secondary education
    - Young people from migrant backgrounds are typically enrolled in “bridging courses” preparing for apprenticeship
  - The high level of non-completions, dropouts and changes (Stalder, 2008; Lamamra & Masdonati, 2009)
    - 20%-40% of apprentices do not finish their apprenticeship within the stated terms of the contract
    - Relational problems in the workplace and insufficient training conditions are seen as main causes leading to attrition
Apprenticeship in the Australian context

- Accessing apprenticeship & traineeship programs
  - Assessing the impact of the economic downturn on apprenticeships and traineeships (Karmel & Misko, 2009)
  - A decline of around 20% in trade commencements is expected

- Non-completion in apprenticeship & traineeship programs
  - Non-completion rates are estimated between 24% - 60% (Grey et al. 1999; Ray et al. 2000; Snell & Hart, 2008)
  - Various reasons for non-completion and dissatisfaction are being proposed (Cully & Curtain, 2001; Callan, 2000; Snell & Hart, 2008)
    - The importance of personal and work-related factors
    - The high level of dissatisfaction regarding training conditions
    - Relational problems in the workplace

Researching training and learning in practice

- Understanding the specificities of workplace learning
  - The cognitive and social dimensions of workplace learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
  - The dualities of workplace learning (Billett, 2009)
  - The role of direct and indirect guidance (Billett, 2001)

- Applying a sociolinguistic lens on workplace learning
  - Conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1978)
  - Interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982)
  - Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress et al., 2001; LeVine & Scollon, 2004)

- Collecting empirical evidence of naturally occurring training practices
  - 150 hours video recordings
  - Three different occupations: car mechanics, automation, electrical assembly
  - 1 vocational school, 2 training centres and 7 training companies in the Geneva area
Joining the workplace: A case study

- The apprentice observed: ROD
  - 1st year automation specialist
  - Migration from Cape Verde

- The training company
  - Construction of electric boards for the building industry

- The training environment
  - The work supervisor: FER
  - Direct immersion into work

A problematic immersion into the workplace

Addressed issues

- What sorts of difficulties did ROD experience when interacting with his trainer and colleagues?
- In what respect were these difficulties related to language use and participation in interaction?

Engraving plastic tags
Observable difficulties

- Reshaping participation and asking for assistance
  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.
  12. {ROD and JUL stand in front of the screen)
  13. JUL: But- {(starts typing on the keyboard)}
  14. It’s like last time, you have too many layers. You have to delete them, you see?
  15. ROD: Oh I always forget that.
  16. JUL: Yes oh yes I know er because this is the second time I’ve had to come here.
  17. And why didn’t you do it all at the same time?
  18. ROD: Because there are some EFI breakers here and I don’t know how to deal with that.
  19. JUL: Right but 8 – 9 – 10 what’s that?
  20. ROD: 8 – 9 – 10 come before the EFI breakers.
  21. JUL: Right I’ll explain this to you another time. {JUL leaves the computer room)

- Referring to the work environment
  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.

- Justifying ways of doing
  17. JUL: And why didn’t you do it all at the same time?
  18. ROD: Because there are some EFI breakers here and I don’t know how to deal with that.
  19. JUL: Right but 8 – 9 – 10 what’s that?
  20. ROD: 8 – 9 – 10 come before the EFI breakers.
Observable difficulties

- Delivering instruction in the workplace
- Retaining instruction
  14. JUL: *It's like last time, you have too many layers. You have to delete them, you see?*
  15. ROD: Oh I always forget that.
  16. JUL: Yes oh yes I know er because this is the second time I've had to come here.
- Acting in substitution of the apprentice
- Postponing instruction
  19. JUL: *Right but 8 – 9- 10 what’s that?*
  20. ROD: *8 – 9 – 10 come before the ETF breakers.*
  21. JUL: *Right I’ll explain this to you another time.* *(JUL leaves the computer room)*
- Doing relational work
- Displaying negative attitudes towards the apprentice: “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!”

Implications and conclusions

- Theoretical implications
  - Accessing vocational knowledge in productive conditions
  - Developing identities in the workplace

- Methodological implications
  - The mediating role of language and discourse in the making of problematic pathways
  - New ways for investigating VET issues

- Practical implications
  - Language use as “content” and “resource” for vocational learning
  - Better training for vocational trainers