

“You’re never too old for music!”

Online discourses of adult music learners, a corpus-based study.

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Abstract

Adult learners are an under-researched group in music education. Although music education research often uses various types of texts (interviews, autobiographical accounts, survey responses), linguistic analysis has not yet been used in this area. Meanwhile, the internet has become a source of support and expression for adult music learners, with many sharing their experiences and thoughts on blogs and forums.

In this study I investigate discourses of adult music learners via a corpus of text from online sources. Using corpus-based discourse analysis techniques, I aim to answer four questions:

- a) How do adult learners 'talk' online about learning music as an adult, specifically about the expectations, limitations and advantages of being an 'older' learner?
- b) What are adult learners' thoughts on and experiences of music exams?
- c) How do adult learners describe their experiences of and relationships with music teachers?
- d) How do adult learners describe the impact and influence of their families on their music learning?

Using corpus searches as a starting point for analysis in each topic, I employ various discourse analysis techniques/ theories including looking at adjective usage, metaphorical language and 'verbal processes'. I find that, in these online texts:

- a) Adult music learners identify as part of a group, recognising that learning as an adult has specific challenges.
- b) Taking exams is portrayed as a stressful (and not always voluntary) 'journey' which requires much support.
- c) Discourses around music teachers suggest that the learner/ teacher relationship is crucial, but can be problematic. Issues around control in the relationship are evident.
- d) Learners describe both positive support and negativity from families, and discuss how family responsibilities impact on learning as an adult.

I conclude that corpus-based discourse analysis has the potential to enrich music education research, in particular in combination with existing research and analysis techniques.

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1a. Introduction

“It feels like there is a growing trend for adults to pick up an instrument.”¹

The Associated Board of the Royal School of Music report *Making Music* estimates that 34% of adults (17.2m) in the UK play an instrument, with 2.5m adults currently receiving musical tuition (2014, p. 15). A recent survey by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education found that 23% of adults would like to learn an instrument (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. The majority of music education research, training and educational material focuses on teaching children. However, there is an increasing interest in the needs of adult music learners, reflected in some specific tutor books being published (e.g. Wedgwood, 2006; Hammond, 2008), and in the presence of online forums, communities and blogs for these adults to share their experiences and seek support. My interest in adult music learners stems from my work as a private music tutor, teaching both adults and children. Adults enquiring about instrumental lessons are often unsure about what they can achieve, even querying whether it is possible to learn an instrument ‘at their age’.

In this study I investigate the discourses of adult learners of music, using a corpus of text posted online by these learners. The methodology of corpus-based discourse analysis has not previously been applied to this subject area, but has the potential to offer insights into the issues, concerns, challenges and priorities of adult music learners. The outcomes could inform music teachers’ training and practice and improve the experience of adults learning music.

I came to the project with existing questions and ideas – from my own teaching and learning experience, from reading around the subject and from talking to other music teachers – about what the primary discourses of adult music learners might be, and an overall aim to investigate how these learners describe their experiences. However, I defined my final research questions via my literature review, a survey of music teachers, and initial corpus searches using a reduced version of the eventual corpus. I describe this process in section 3c.

¹ Quote from a music teacher who participated in my survey (section 3c.ii).

1b. Research questions

In this study I aim to uncover some of the main discourses in online texts written by adult music learners, and answer the following questions:

- a) How do adult learners 'talk' online about learning music as an adult, specifically about the expectations, limitations and advantages of being an 'older' learner?
- b) What are adult learners' thoughts on and experiences of music exams?
- c) How do adult learners describe their experiences of and relationships with music teachers?
- d) How do adult learners describe the impact and influence of their families on their music learning?

1c. What is an adult learner?

For the purposes of this research, an 'adult learner of music' is anyone who defines themselves as such through their postings on the relevant websites which supply the data for this study. From reading these sites, speaking to other teachers and from my own experience, this group encapsulates a range of experiences including:

- adult beginners, who have never played any instrument before ('instrument' includes the study of singing).
- adult beginners on one instrument who currently play or have previously played another instrument.
- 'restarters' who have played in childhood, had a break from playing and returned to study in adulthood.
- adults who have learned an instrument continuously since childhood.
- adult learners who attend private music lessons, or tuition through e.g. a community music group.
- learners who are self-taught.
- learners in a range of genres – the majority of data for this study comes from those learning in the classical music tradition, but also includes some learning other styles, such as folk and jazz.

This group mainly consists of amateur players, although in my experience a considerable number of music teachers also consider themselves to be adult learners, especially if they are learning a new instrument. Professional musicians and aspiring professionals (e.g. students

studying music at higher education level) tend not to define themselves, or be defined by others, as part of this group (even if they are learning new skills), which suggests the strong association of this 'label' with amateur status.

2. Literature review

Literature that influences this study falls into two main areas. Thematically, the most relevant studies are in music education, in particular those which involve adult learners (section 2a). Methodologically, this study uses techniques from corpus-based discourse analysis (section 2b).

2a. 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 in the subject.

These are generally small-scale studies, using participant interviews, surveys or autobiographical techniques such as ‘life stories’ (Pitts, 2012) or ‘life paths’ (Taylor, 2011). There seems to be a particular emphasis on older adults (Bowles, 2010, p. 50), perhaps reflecting a perception of artistic activities as something that people tend to do in retirement, but research is finding that there is 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).

These studies find varying attitudes to musical education in adulthood, from it being ‘never too late’ to learn, to feeling restricted by age. Some researchers came across a sense of limitation in adult learners (Taylor, 2011, p. 355; Roulston, Jutras & Kim, 2015, p. 329) fuelled by “assumptions about the optimal age for learning an instrument” (Pitts, 2012, p. 141), the “discourse around talent” (Lamont, 2011, p. 384) – the idea that people have an inherent level of musical ability – and a narrative of “regret about wasted time” (Lamont, 2011, p. 380). Adult learners often have “a constant awareness of their own perceived inadequacies” (Hobbs, 2014, p. 20) and “a relatively negative musical identity” (Lamont, 2011, p. 369).

Many studies highlight adult learners' high levels of intrinsic motivation (Lamont, 2011, p. 380; Taylor, 2011, p.351; Hobbs, 2014, p. 20) but also find that they may struggle with "unrealistic expectations" and the accompanying frustrations these may cause (Taylor, 2011, p. 358).

Much research identifies family as a strong influence on adult music learners (Pitts, 2012; Taylor, 2011), citing "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 in these studies often express "a high level of trust and appreciation of teachers encountered in adulthood" (Pitts, 2012, p. 143), with teachers frequently portrayed as 'restoring faith' after bad childhood experiences of music. 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) finds that 67% of music teachers express a need for specific training in teaching adults (Bowles, 2010, p. 56). In particular, these teachers identified challenges around meeting the needs and different learning styles of adults. Teachers found that adult learners were highly self-motivated and felt that teaching them was rewarding, but also mentioned having to tackle students' "learned habits or preconceived ideas" (Bowles, 2010, p. 57).

These studies also highlight issues around adults' other commitments – "business issues" around scheduling and cancelling lessons (Bowles, 2010, p. 56) and "the problem of making time to practise" (Taylor, 2011, p. 358).

Despite being a common part of music learning as a child, music exams are not frequently mentioned in these studies. Where they are, there is ambivalence – with some adults feeling that "being tested or assessed is at odds with their experience of music as a liberating creative experience or leisure (and pleasure) activity" whilst others like the structure and motivation of working towards exams (Hobbs, 2014, p. 21).

In summary, there is a lack of large-scale studies into adult music learners. Whilst many small-scale studies complement each other's findings, there is potential for larger-scale research to give more wide-ranging and comprehensive insight into the area. Most existing research is predominantly qualitative, analysing interviews, autobiographical writing or

survey responses. Pitts (2014, p. 192) explains, these autobiographical methods allow for “a greater degree of respondents’ own interpretations”, 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 text (spoken interviews or written responses), there has not been any previous linguistic analysis of this text. In section 2b I discuss corpus-based discourses analysis techniques which allow large quantities of textual data to be analysed, and also enable the use of anonymised data not specifically elicited for research purposes, perhaps revealing different aspects of adult learners’ ‘stories’.

2b. Corpus-based discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, taking the approach that “choice of words expresses an ideological position” (Stubbs, cited in Baker 2006, p. 47), is particularly suited to investigating issues around the use of language to express identities and attitudes, such as in the texts produced by music learners, either in response to research studies or independently. Recent developments in discourse analysis include the use of corpus-based techniques, for example Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery (2013) on the representation of Muslims in the British press. Corpus linguistics enables the analysis of larger data sets than could be handled ‘manually’. Since patterns are identified by running searches and automated reports, these approaches can be seen to lessen somewhat 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”. I deal briefly with the matter of researcher ‘bias’ and subjectivity in section 3c.

Corpus approaches are particularly suited to online texts. Computer-mediated communication can produce large quantities of text in a short period of time – it is estimated that the average social media user receives content amounting to 54,000 words daily (IACP Center for Social Media, 2015) – and building a corpus offers a way to analyse this large amount of data and identify patterns and discourses in the text. Corpus linguistics techniques are also increasingly crossing over into other discipline areas. The ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) promotes this interdisciplinary work with projects researching topics such as online misogyny², using corpus techniques to investigate online

² http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/?page_id=1022

abuse and threats. This not only analyses the use of language but identifies patterns in online behaviour, with the potential to inform the online industry and legislators. These approaches have been used in other subject areas, such as language education³, healthcare (e.g. Semino et al., 2015), and geography⁴ but not as yet in music research, education-related or otherwise.

In combination with corpus searches to find frequent words and collocates of particular terms, I draw on several discourse analysis techniques, in particular:

- analysis of metaphor use, in particular 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.
- ‘transitivity’ analysis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) which examines how grammatical form represents experience. Halliday’s (2004) ‘participant roles’ and ‘process types’ aim to show how experience is represented by verb clauses, and have been used to analyse how fiction writers create characters (e.g. Montgomery, 1993). They provide a useful framework for looking at how identity is portrayed in text.

In section 3, I describe how I compiled a corpus of online data and used corpus-based discourse analysis to investigate the discourses of adult music learners.

3. Data & methodology

3a. Data

The data for this study consists of a 500,000-word corpus of text posted online by adult learners of music between January 2010 and April 2015.

In order to compile a corpus of these postings, I searched online to find 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, sidebars and forum ‘quote’ buttons. When the pages were converted to plain text, emoticons were rendered as the text ‘shortcuts’ which can be used to produce them (e.g. :-) for ☺) or as codes such as ‘gif’. I decided to retain these in the corpus as they indicate expressions of emotion or mood.

³ http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/?page_id=1327

⁴ <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/spatialhum>

As Baker (2006, p. 36) points out, computer-mediated communications can often include multiple quotations of previous texts, such as forum posts or email replies. These multiple quotations can skew frequency data, but it can also be argued that their use is an inherent part of online communication – quotation may imply emphasis or agreement, and examining how they are used may illuminate aspects of online interaction. Bearing this in mind, I created two versions of the corpus – one with the full text, which may be used for future research, and one with ‘first time’ entries only, removing quotes. The current study uses the second version, so frequency data reflects original postings only.

3b. 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, e.g. in forums or online chatrooms. 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 equally most displayed ‘self-regulation’ – they “only posted online what they were happy for others to access” (2014, p. 20).
- whether to inform site users of the research - would informing ‘participants’ constitute interfering in this community, cause problems or change the nature of postings? The NatCen Social Research report found that participants felt “their answer will be influenced by the fact that they are answering something they know someone else is going to read” (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, supported by advice from corpus linguists in CASS, was to use the data entirely anonymously. I felt that making an ‘announcement’ or contacting site users would interfere in the online communities concerned – as well as influencing what people posted, it could, more importantly, potentially cause problems with communities that many members see as a source of support in their lives, perhaps making them feel uncomfortable about seeking advice as they normally do.

This approach is facilitated by the corpus-based approach of analysing large data sets for patterns. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, I do not identify the sites

used, and quotations do not include personal or identifying information, such as usernames. In order to ensure that only publicly available data was used, I downloaded all text without logging in to any sites which have this option. In the discussion below, I do not use any quotes which contain personal identifying information, for example where learners use real names or describe personal circumstances in detail.

3c. Defining my research questions

I was aware when undertaking this research that my own interest in the subject – my main reason for wanting to research it – would influence the questions I wanted to ask. I have my own views on adult learners from my experience of teaching them, and indeed of being one myself. I have discussed adult students and the issues that affect them with students themselves and with fellow music teachers.

One of my reasons for choosing a corpus-based approach is that it counteracts this ‘bias’ to some extent (as discussed in section 2c)– rather than analysing a few selected texts which might fit a particular view, I am able to investigate patterns across a large set of data. However, as Baker (2006, p. 175) states, corpus-based discourse analysis is “not simply a quantitative procedure” – it is “still a matter of interpretation... subject to the researcher’s own ideological stance” (Baker, 2006, p. 92).

Bearing in mind that my own stance will inevitably influence my interpretation, rather than simply choose topics that I *thought* would be relevant, I defined my research questions via three sources - the major themes appearing in literature on the subject (as discussed in section 2a), a teacher survey (section 3c.ii), and initial corpus searches (section 3c.iii).

3c.i. Defining my research questions – literature review

As I outlined in section 2a, the major themes in existing literature on adult music learners are:

- relationships with and influence of teachers throughout the learner’s life
- specific issues around learning as an adult – high motivation, but also some ‘unrealistic expectations’; perceived limitations; the challenges of balancing learning with ‘adult life’
- support from and influence of family and friends.

These are an obvious starting point for research, but to further refine my research questions I carried out a survey of music teachers and a brief pilot study.

3c.ii. Defining my research questions – teacher survey

In early 2015, I conducted an online survey (shared via social media and on my teaching website⁵) in order to gain some insight into current views of music teachers on adult learners. There were thirteen respondents, all of whom currently teach or have previously taught adult learners. Obviously this is a small sample, but along with the themes drawn from the literature review, the survey responses helped to inform my final research questions.

The main themes appearing in teachers' responses (number of respondents mentioning each in brackets) were:

- adults have a different learning style to younger students (10)
- a different teaching style is required for adults (11)
- adults tend to be more highly motivated (9)
- teaching adults requires more patience, sensitivity, encouragement (5)
- adults are not generally interested in taking exams (3)
- adults tend to have high expectations of themselves (7)
- adults have more demands on their time – “life gets in the way” (5)
- teaching adults is challenging (5)
- teaching adults is rewarding (7)

In general, teachers were positive about teaching adult learners, whilst emphasising that it presents a different set of challenges to teaching children, some even describing it as a “separate skill”. Most described adult learners as learning in a different way to younger students, for example, “not as quick at picking things up”. The majority found adults to be more motivated than younger students (in part because they “are paying their own money” for lessons) and clearer about their objectives. Alternative views were that “they don't always have a clear idea about what they want to achieve” and “it's harder to keep them motivated to persevere”. Many mentioned adults having high expectations of themselves which teachers felt they had to manage carefully.

The majority presented the challenges of teaching adults as rewarding, but a few teachers found it “difficult”. Several respondents preferred teaching adults – “I love teaching adults”, “I've been thoroughly inspired by those I've taught”, “I don't speak the language of children very well, I work best with adults”. On the other hand, a minority found it frustrating and “wouldn't do it if I didn't have to”.

⁵ Survey available at <http://www.sheffieldflute.co.uk/ma-survey.html>

These findings echo the findings of Bowles (2010), that teachers generally find teaching adults both rewarding and challenging, with common themes around different learning styles, expectations, motivation and 'life getting in the way'.

Whereas Hobbs (2014) found that adult learners have varying attitudes to exams, the only mention of exams here indicates less interest in them. However, as will be shown below, the corpus reveals some different patterns and priorities.

From the survey, I took forward the following themes, which fit closely with those from the literature review:

- expectations, perceived limitations and advantages of learning as an adult
- 'adult life' having an impact on learning
- teacher support (the need for greater patience and sensitivity).

3c.iii. Defining my research questions – pilot study

To further define the research questions which would contribute to the overall aim of this study, I ran a pilot study of initial searches using a reduced (50,000-word) version of the corpus.

I analysed the corpus using AntConc⁶ which has the ability to produce words lists (by frequency), concordances and collocate lists, with some statistical analysis. I ran a word list search for the most frequently used words in the pilot corpus. The initial list contained many 'function' words – these could be useful in examining the style of the text, but as this study focusses on identifying discourses and themes, I removed these, leaving the most frequent lexical words.

⁶ Downloaded from <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html>

Table 1: The thirty most frequent lexical words in the pilot corpus

Rank	Word	Frequency	Category
1	gif	610	A
2	lesson	440	B
3	exam	409	C
4	practicing	397	D
5	music	336	
6	teacher	306	B
7	exam	302	C
8	good	220	G
9	play	207	D
10	time	151	
11	smile	112	A
12	grade	104	B
13	pieces	98	
14	like	94	G
15	piano	89	
16	biggrin	81	A
17	virtuoso	77	G
18	really	76	G
19	think	68	G
20	work	63	D
21	playing	60	D
22	events	54	D
23	practice	53	D
24	advanced	49	G
25	support	42	E
26	help	41	E
27	very	37	G
28	piece	36	D
29	much	32	G
30	adult	30	F

I categorised these words as follows to show the themes which they seemed to imply:

A = indicates use of emoticon

B = relating to lessons/ teachers

C = relating to exams

D = relating to playing/ practising

E = relating to support network

F = relating to age

G = intensifiers, assessment or appraisal of something.

These results suggest that some of the themes prominent in the existing literature and teacher survey, including teacher relationships and support networks, also appeared frequently in the corpus data. Words such as *work* and *practice/ practicing*⁷ point to potential discourses around motivation and/ or the practicalities of practising. The frequency of use of *adult* suggests there may be discussion around the particularities of being an adult learner. Descriptions of strong emotions were suggested by the presence of intensifiers and the appearance of emoticon codes. The high frequency of *exam* was intriguing as this was not a common theme in the literature, and as discussed in section 3c.ii above, teachers found many adult learners were not interested in taking exams. Clearly this merits further attention, and so discourses around exams became the focus of one of my research questions (section 5).

Since teacher relationships, support networks and the particular issues relating to learning as an adult were also prominent in the literature review and teacher survey, this brief pilot study helped me to confirm my final research questions as stated in section 1b.

3d. Methodology – full study

As with the pilot study, I analysed the full corpus using AntConc, using the word list, collocate and concordance features to examine patterns around words relating to the research questions. I use various aspects of discourse analysis to analyse the findings from the corpus searches. I describe the details and parameters of particular searches in each section of the analysis below. I look at frequently occurring terms in relation to each question, how these may be grouped into recurring ‘themes’ (such as language expressing emotion), and how they are used in context (for example, looking at patterns in how intensifiers and mitigators

⁷ There were far more occurrences of *practicing* than *practising* in the corpus, although discussions around the ‘correct’ spelling of the noun/ verb forms also appeared!

are used with emotion terms). I explore metaphorical language, adjective use, and touch on passivisation. I also use aspects of 'transitivity' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Although I do not undertake a full transitivity analysis, I use Halliday's concept of 'verbal processes', the representation in text of people speaking, in several sections to look at how adult learners represent themselves and others as 'saying' certain things about learning music.

4. "Ageing grey matter" – expectations, limitations and advantages of learning music as an adult

A prominent theme in the literature review and teacher survey is that of age and its impact on learning music. Teachers suggest that adult learners are more motivated than younger students, but often have less time and more responsibilities which get in the way of practice and progress. As discussed in section 2a, existing research highlights learners' preconceptions around the limitations of age – the idea that to be 'successful' at music you must start learning as a child or that it is more difficult to learn new skills as an adult.

In my pilot study, I found that *adult** (including *adult*, *adults* and *adulthood*) was the 30th most frequent lexical term. In the full corpus, *adult** appears 1673 times, *age** (includes *age*, *ages*, and *aged*) 141 times and *old** (includes *old* and *older*) 260 times. In this section I look in more detail at how these terms are used and what they suggest about discourses around age in music learning.

Many of the occurrences of *adult** refer to learners' identities as adult learners – the phrase *adult learner(s)* occurs 684 times. There is a clear awareness that they are a distinct group with a sense of community:

'me and another brave adult'

'I'm an adult clarinet learner'

'I too am an adult learner'

'Another adult learner here'

'hello fellow adult learners'

There are also descriptions of specific challenges and requirements – the differences between learning as a child and as an adult, both practical and psychological:

'It's difficult being an adult learner and trying to fit in practice'

'Am finding it hard being an adult learner as life often gets in the way'

'as an adult learner self belief is more difficult to come by'

'they don't think about the fact that adults don't get school holidays'
'teacher doesn't want me to get bored as an adult learner'
'adult learners, we have higher expectations'
'how much more difficult it is for an adult with all the pressures of life'

Other uses of *adult* also contribute to this discourse of specific adult learner issues:

'I just hope that an adult brain is still plastic enough to process all this information'
'Trying to learn too quickly – a common adult fault'
'I find learning as an adult has its advantages and disadvantages'
'in general as an adult, I don't like being criticised'
'If I wasn't an adult, I think I would have cried'

There are 141 occurrences of *age** in the corpus. Disregarding the few which do not refer to the age of the learners (e.g. 'I've been wanting to learn this piece for an age'), many examples contribute to the discourse of a distinct adult music learner identity with its associated challenges:

'I really should know better at my age and feel sorry for the examiners'
'question our ability to keep learning as we age'
'first music exam in my life, taken at age...'
'not sure why a middle aged granny who hasn't sat a piano exam before is doing this'
'wondering if I'm able to hammer new stuff into my ageing grey matter'

Some examples show an awareness that it is may be considered unusual to learn later in life:

'at the age of 67, I started to teach myself'
'I began learning at the ripe old age of 48, having never played anything'.

A few learners mention the benefits of age, with one saying they used to be a perfectionist but 'with age am learning to relax', suggesting that as well as the challenges there can be advantages to learning as an adult.

Again, exploring the usage of *old** reveals discourses around whether adults can learn as easily as children. Some of these are positive, challenging preconceptions around 'being too old':

‘the learning aptitudes of old and young are actually quite similar’
‘the only disadvantage of being older is that you might expire before learning...’
‘you’re never too old for music!’

However, some learners do express the challenges of being older:

‘I am 57 years old so get quite tired after work by the time I get to my lesson’
‘we suffer more with nerves as we get older, and I certainly had higher expectations’
‘not sure that my old brain is up to it’

The results of corpus searches for *adult**, *age** and *old** and using concordances to further investigate their usage shows that adult learners consider themselves as an identifiable group. There are discussions around the particular challenges of being an adult – the psychological, the practical, and how age affects the learning process, whether the idea of ‘ageing grey matter’ finding it harder to learn new skills is true or not.

Several of the examples above relate to exams in the context of adult music learning, and these are the subject of the next section.

5. “Uncharted territory” – adult learners and music exams

Several of the teachers who completed my survey (section 3c.ii) mentioned that they found adult learners were not particularly interested in exams. Similarly exams are not a particularly prominent topic in existing literature on adult music learners. It would appear that many adult learners feel that “being tested or assessed is at odds with their experience of music as a liberating creative experience or leisure (and pleasure) activity” (Hobbs, 2014, p. 21). However, some do fall in to the other category Hobbs describes, those who like having exams as goals or markers of their current standard, and my pilot study revealed that exams were mentioned frequently, with *exam* being the third most frequent word. In the full corpus, *exam* was ranked 38th in the word list.

To investigate discourses around exams, I ran collocate searches for *exam** to discover which words were being used in conjunction with *exam*, *exams*, *examination* or *examiner* (this also picked up words such as *example* but there were only a few instances of this, which I removed manually before undertaking the analysis). Baker (2006, p. 114) suggests that collocational analysis “gives us the most salient and obvious lexical patterns surrounding a subject.”

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 chose to sort results by MI (‘mutual information’) score, rather than by simple frequency of occurrence. This statistical measure identifies words which occur more frequently than would normally be expected, which is useful for identifying patterns specific to these texts – the terms that these learners in particular associate with each topic. MI can “give high scores to relatively low frequency words” (Baker, 2006, p. 102), but I chose to include these low frequency words for the reasons stated above.

There were 2040 collocates in total. Table 2 shows the first thirty of these.

Table 2: Top thirty collocates of *exam**

Rank	Word	Frequency	MI score
1	willingly	14	8.5878
2	uncharted	5	8.32477
3	forces	3	8.17276
4	swinging	4	8.00284
5	yoga	1	7.5878
6	withdraw	1	7.5878
7	witches	1	7.5878
8	waltzing	1	7.5878
9	vowed	4	7.5878
10	visualize	1	7.5878
11	viewed	1	7.5878
12	unravelling	1	7.5878
13	unnerving	1	7.5878
14	undergo	7	7.5878
15	trusted	1	7.5878

16	tottered	1	7.5878
17	toll	1	7.5878
18	teatime	1	7.5878
19	tapered	2	7.5878
20	sworn	1	7.5878
21	sweetheart	1	7.5878
22	suspicious	1	7.5878
23	stomped	1	7.5878
24	stifle	1	7.5878
25	stern	1	7.5878
26	sleepy	1	7.5878
27	respectful	1	7.5878
28	reserving	1	7.5878
29	requirement	2	7.5878
30	reprieve	1	7.5878

As Table 2 shows, even in just the first thirty collocates, there are words associated with *exam** which suggest varying discourses. Looking further, at the first 1000 collocates in order of MI score (after removing usernames and real names, which scored highly as they are picked up as ‘unusual’ words), it was evident that many of the terms being used in conjunction with *exam** could be categorised into several groups:

- Emotions and feelings
- Verbal processes
- Metaphors – violence and pain, war, movement and travel, sport
- Support – examiners, teachers and the online community

In the rest of this section, I use the top 1000 collocates as a starting point to explore these categories and discuss the discourses they suggest around adult learners taking exams.

5a. Emotions and feelings

Of the top 1000 collocates of *exam**, 43 referred to emotions or feelings:

Table 3: emotion/ feeling terms in the list of collocates of *exam, categorised into positive and negative (listed in order of MI score).**

Positive emotion/ feeling terms	Negative emotion/ feeling terms
willingly	unnerving
calm	dubious
glad	panicky
laughed	embarrassed
joy	suspicious
pleasant	despondent
giggles	dread
chuffed	stressful
enjoyable	annoy
relief	worrying
comfortable	nervous
hope	hopeless
confidence	dreading
	worried
	freaked
	hated
	horror
	envious
	flustered
	grumpy
	stressing
	annoying
	shocked
	phobic
	panic
	stress
	daft
	anxiety
	bore
	cry

As table 3 shows, there are more than twice as many negative emotion terms as positive ones. Several terms also appear which indicate an expression of negative emotion – *eek*, *urgh* and *gulp* – and only one which expressed positive emotion, *wow*. It seems clear from this list that exams are a source of a range of negative feelings from the mild (e.g. *flustered*, *dubious*) to the very strong (e.g. *hated*, *dreading*, *phobic*, *horror*).

Using the concordance function to look at these terms in context finds that the terms of mild negativity are often preceded by mitigators, such as *slightly*, making them even ‘milder’:

‘I was a **bit** flustered about the exam requirements’

‘I am **slightly** dubious about exams’

‘I have a **rather** daft question regarding my exam’

These mentions of minor concerns perhaps suggests that some adult learners do not have significant worries about exams, but do still have ‘low level’ worries about them.

Alternatively, maybe some learners are analysing the exam process in great detail, and as such are concerned about even small issues.

On the other hand, the stronger negative emotion terms are often accompanied by intensifiers or other terms which emphasise them, for example:

‘the thing I am **absolutely** dreading about taking exams’

‘**huge** panic before my last exam’

‘hated the **whole** exam experience’

These intensified negative expressions of emotion suggest that some learners are very strongly affected by worries about the exam experience and struggle to find any positives about it. In fact, looking closer at the use of the word *stress*, which appears 13 times as a collocate of *exam**, reveals discussions about whether it is ‘worth’ undergoing these negative experiences:

‘I have come to the conclusion that exams aren't worth the stress’

‘has anyone decided exams just aren't worth the stress?’

‘learning without the stress of exams hanging over me’

‘exams shouldn't be a huge stress’

These discussions show that exams are a subject of much discussion partly because adult learners debate whether to take them or not, suggesting that the decision as to whether

exams are “at odds” (Hobbs, 2014, p. 21) with what they want from learning music is one that is taken after much consideration.

Of the positive emotion terms in the corpus, several refer to being ‘free’ of exams, again emphasising the negativity associated with the experience:

‘post-exam relief’
‘I am so glad that exam is over’
‘my first lesson after the exam was a joy’

However, some do express positive feelings about the exam process. Some of these refer to the actual exam itself:

‘glad I sat the exam’
‘the examiner laughed and it broke the ice’
‘I find that exams are a positive and enjoyable experience’

Looking closer at some of these positive terms finds that they relate to learners’ experience of examiners (*calm, pleasant*) – I discuss these in section 5d.

Many focus on the sense of achievement in taking the exam, and positivity about the results:

‘I am really chuffed with my exam mark’

Some positive feelings are associated with the discussions around whether and when to take exams (as discussed above), with learners putting forward an ‘ideal’ where exams are taken when they are ready and confident, for example:

‘doing an exam which feels comfortable’
‘it gave her confidence for the exam’

However, some apparently positive terms refer to negative exam experiences, and decisions not to take further exams, for example:

‘I made a conscious decision never to undergo an exam **willingly** again’

5b. Verbal processes

Halliday’s definition of a ‘verbal process’ is a “symbolic exchange of meaning” (2004, p. 253) and he considers them “an important resource in various kinds of discourse” (2004, p. 252). They do not necessarily involve spoken words but are attributed to a ‘sayer’.

The list of collocates of *exam** contains nine terms which imply verbal processes - *sworn, criticising, complain, dictates, swearing, vowed, refuse, refused, congratulate*. The majority of these have the learners as 'sayers', suggesting they are expressing strong opinions on exams. As with many of the terms in this section, negativity seems to dominate. Looking at these in context reveals that several refer to discussions around whether exams are a 'good thing' and decisions on whether to take them or not (tying in with the discussions explored in section 5a):

'it just wasn't worth it and I refused to do any more exams'

'I am not criticising exams'

One learner mentions a teacher who 'coaxed me into doing an exam when I had sworn I would never do another one', whilst another states that they respect their teacher but 'would refuse to do exams if he asked me to'. This suggests some unwanted pressure from teachers, something which I discuss further in section 5c. The idea of pressure is compounded by an instance where the exam itself is positioned as 'sayer' – 'I want to learn what I want not what the exam dictates'.

Other verbal process terms suggest a discourse of learners as 'customers' of the exam boards, as there are several discussions around *complaining* about bad exam experiences, such as problems with the venue.

5c. Metaphorical language

The collocate search revealed an array of metaphor usage, most of which falls into four overlapping groups – terms relating to violence and pain, military/ naval language, metaphors of movement or travel, and comparisons with sport.

Violence, injury and pain

Several terms appear which suggest violence, injury and pain. In particular, there seems to be a linking of exams with crime-related violence – *murdering, killing* – and punishment – *executed*, for example:

'murdering my exam pieces'

'this exam prep is killing me'

This theme is compounded by discussions around what to eat before an exam - the words *eat* and *meal* also appear on the collocate list, and looking at these in context reveals

discussions around eating on exam days. The phrase *final meal* is used, referencing the last meal of prisoners due to be executed! This ties in with the sense of 'freedom' that many learners express once exams are complete or they have decided not to take any more, as discussed in section 5a.

Medical terms are also used, including *dissection*, *post-mortem* and *dentist*. The first two of these refer to post-exam analysis, i.e. 'a dissection of how my exam went'. One learner compares the exam experience to visiting the dentist, again compounding the discourse of exams as unpleasant.

Words referring to pain include *excruciating* and *suffering*:

'waiting for exam results is excruciating'

'suffering from exam stress'

The extremity of these terms ties in with the strongly negative emotions discussed in section 5a.

War metaphors

Many collocates seem to fall into a military theme, suggesting that taking exams is being compared to a war or military campaign. This clearly overlaps with the group of terms relating to violence. In particular, there are terms which reference weapons - *bullet*, *forearmed*, *target*, *aim*. These terms are generally used in fairly typical metaphorical expressions:

'bite the bullet and do an exam'

'forewarned is forearmed for the exam'

'lining up the exam pieces for target practice'

Some collocates suggest military invasion – *territory*, *borderline*, *withdraw*, *retreat*.

Sometimes these are part of metaphorical expressions, for example 'exams are uncharted territory for me'. Other terms form part of the standard vocabulary of exams - 'borderline marks', 'withdraw my exam entry'. Similarly, the word *officer* appears, but refers to exam officials or administrators. Although these are not strictly being used metaphorically, their presence alongside other military terms could compound this sense of 'exam-taking as war'.

These comparisons often seem negative, but there are a few positive terms which link with the same metaphorical theme - *surviving*, *medal*, *won*:

‘just surviving the exam will be something to celebrate’

These imply that the exam process is seen as a ‘battle’ and completing it successfully as a ‘triumph’. Again, these suggest strong feelings around the experience.

Movement and travel

Some of the terms in the previous category suggest a mission that involves a journey, and, again overlapping with this, there are a further group of terms which suggest movement or travel.

There are terms which position the exam as something to move towards such as *milestones* and *onward*, but also those in which the imagery is that of the exam moving towards the learner – *nears*, *forthcoming*, *approaches*, *looming*. The first group suggest a metaphor of exam preparation as a journey, but the second group could imply a feeling of lack of control over that journey.

The word *looming* in particular implies a sense of something undesirable approaching, as evident in its usage in the corpus:

‘is there an exam looming on the horizon?’

‘if the exam is looming nearer’

‘good luck to everyone with exams looming’

‘stressed because of the exam looming ahead’

Other movement terms in the list which could suggest a lack of control on the part of the learner include *push*, *pushing*, *pull*, *pulling*, *falling*, *force*, *fall*, *throwing*, *fallen*, and *lifted*. This is certainly the case with *pushing* which is used for pressure from teachers, e.g. ‘my teacher is pushing me to enter the exam’. This suggests unwillingness on the part of the learners, a lack of control over their own learning pathway, and the influence of teachers, something which is discussed in more detail in section 6.

Similarly, *force* refers to pressure put on learners by doing exams, e.g. ‘the exam will force me to practise’. Although on the face of it, being forced to do something seems negative, this could also be seen as part of the discourse of exams being something to aim for, providing motivation in learning, and part of the discussion around the positives and negatives of exam-taking. This is supported by the presence of the term *motivate* (and variants) in the collocate list:

'some people are motivated by exams'

'having an exam coming up motivates me to practise'

Pull and *pulling* turn out to refer to actions by the learners themselves, used as part of set phrases:

'I was on the point of **pulling out** of the exam'

'I couldn't **pull it off** in the exam'

The terms *falling*, *fall* and *fallen* are used in both negative and positive ways:

'nerves taking over and falling apart during the exam'

'you fall to pieces in an exam situation'

'I have fallen in love with my exam pieces'

'if the scales fall into place in the exam'

These again suggest lack of control (or a fear of the same) and a sense that fate is somehow involved in the exam outcome – things will go well *if [they] fall into place*. Looking at *throwing* in context shows that it is in fact being used in the phrase *throwing dice* (one learner states that proper preparation is necessary for exams, rather than going in feeling like you are *throwing dice* and 'gambling' on whether you might pass or not) which also ties in with this theme of control versus fate. *Luck* occurs 292 times in the corpus, mainly in the context of learners wishing each other *good luck* in exams (discussed further in section 5d), further supporting the idea that there is an element of fate involved.

Emphasising the idea of lack of control are several terms which suggest comparison with being 'lost at sea' – *uncharted* (mentioned above), *adrift*, *wreck*:

'I was a wreck in the exam'

'came *adrift* in the exam'

Other movement metaphors describe smaller movements - *wobbly*, *blips*, *fumbling*. Like the 'mildly negative' terms discussed in section 5a, these are often preceded by mitigators:

'**a bit** wobbly in the exam'

'**a bit** of a blip on exam day'

'**a small** blip in the exam'

As with the emotion terms, this mixture of small scale and large scale movement metaphors suggests a range of discourses around exams, from 'low level' concerns to big impacts on

learners. The metaphorical ‘domains’ of war and journey are often associated with the challenges of life in general, with illness and with arguments (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, cited in Semino, 2008, p. 33), so this suggests that exams are a ‘big deal’ to students and not an entirely positive one.

Sport

Tying in with the metaphors of movement, several sport-related terms appear, suggesting that some learners see the exam process as similar to sports training and participation.

There are references to actual sporting activities – *hurdle*, *treadmill* – which position exams as a challenge or something undesirable, supporting the negative emotion discourses discussed in section 5a:

‘an exam-hurdle’

‘an exam – a self-imposed hurdle’

‘a break from the exam treadmill’

Learners also use terms which refer to the processes of participating in sports – *goals*, *finishing*, *entering*, *won*, *medal* – implying that the exam experience is similar in its sense of progress and achievement. There are also words which reference sports training techniques, such as *tapered* and *visualize*, for example ‘you can try to visualize yourself being in the exam situation’. The ‘final meal’ discussion mentioned above also contributes to this discourse, as it contributes terms such as the initially mystifying *potato* to the list of collocates. Food for exam days is discussed in a similar way to nutrition for athletes, with advice relating to maintaining energy (such as *low GI carb-based meal*) and suggestions that learners might want to try *a practice exam and a practice meal* in the same way as athletes test out foods in training. These sports training comparisons contribute to a sense that exam preparation is seen by many learners as a type of physical and mental training for the ‘event’, and along with the military metaphors suggest an element of competition in discourses around exams – that they are something that can be ‘won’ or ‘defeated’.

5d. Discourses of support

The theme of support in relation to exams became evident when investigating the positive adjectives which appear in the collocate list:

forgiving, courteous, kindly, polite, respectful, friendly, fabulous, encouraging, supportive, lovely, pleasant

along with other terms which suggest a discourse of help, kindness and support:

angel, sweetheart, helping, sympathy

Running concordance searches to look at these terms in context reveals that many of them refer to examiners and their behaviour/ attitude to the learners, for example:

'your examiner was a sweetheart'

'the examiner was pleasant too'

'my examiner was kind, gentle, courteous'

'the examiner was forgiving'

'nice, calm, friendly examiner'

'examiners have been supportive of me as an adult'

Where (only a few) negative adjectives occur in relation to examiners – *stern, critical* – these are in the context of considering future exams, rather than descriptions of actual examiners:

'I would go to pieces if the examiner was too stern'

'as adult learners we tend to be more critical of ourselves than examiner might be'

This suggests that as well as worries about their performance in exams, adult learners have concerns about facing 'scary' examiners. The abundance of positive terms around examiners suggests that in reality this rarely happens, but the fact that adult learners do describe their positive experiences of examiners could indicate that this comes as a pleasant surprise to them – because of the worries beforehand they feel it is worth mentioning. It could also be seen as offering reassurance to other adult learners, a tendency which I discuss further later in this section.

Several of the positive terms refer to teachers and their support with the exam preparation process, for example:

'she is an angel'

'my teacher is helping me'

'my teacher... lovely and encouraging'

Adult learners' relationships with their teachers are the subject of section 6 where they are discussed more fully.

Sympathy refers exclusively to adult learners' attitudes to each other – giving reassurance over exam worries and difficulties:

'you have my sympathy'

'I have every sympathy with this'

This theme of mutual support is echoed by the occurrence of terms such as *hug*:

'here's a group hug for everyone waiting for exam results'

'a big hug for exam day'

As discussed above the term *luck* occurs frequently and this is primarily in the context of 'good luck' (of 292 instances of *luck*, 254 are part of the phrase *good luck*). This support also includes sharing the 'good times': 'congratulations on taking the exam', 'congratulations on your exam result'. There is a real sense that learners support and encourage each other.

6. "Not an ogre" – adult learners and music teachers

The influence of teachers on adult learners and their skills in teaching adults are prominent themes in existing literature (e.g. Pitts, 2012; Hobbs, 2014). Existing studies examine the views of teachers on working with adults (e.g. Bowles, 2010), and my teacher survey (section 3c.ii) found that teachers highlighted the need for particular skills in this area. The word *teacher* is 6th on the word list in my pilot study (section 3c.iii), confirming the fact that learner/ teacher relationships is a theme worth pursuing.

In order to investigate how these adult learners write about teachers, I used AntConc to search for collocates of *teacher**. I used the same parameters as for *exam** in section 5, for the same reasons and to ensure consistency in my explorations of different topics. I also use concordances to look at examples of what teachers are described as doing. Obviously this analysis misses examples where teachers are referred to by pronouns, but it gives significant insight into the discourses around adult learners and their teachers.

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

Table 4 – top thirty collocates of *teacher**

Rank	Word	Frequency	MI score
1	horrified	6	9.77071
2	maternity	3	9.35567
3	hampering	3	9.35567
4	wows	1	8.77071
5	whinge	1	8.77071

6	vinyl	1	8.77071
7	vibe	3	8.77071
8	unlucky	1	8.77071
9	unfailingly	4	8.77071
10	tweaks	1	8.77071
11	treats	1	8.77071
12	treasure	2	8.77071
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
18	tempting	7	8.77071
19	temper	1	8.77071
20	teatime	1	8.77071
21	swapped	1	8.77071
22	surmise	1	8.77071
23	stunningly	2	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
29	spurred	1	8.77071
30	soonish	1	8.77071

As even this short list shows, an intriguing mixture of terms appear in association with *teacher**, worthy of further investigation. I considered the first 1000, again after removing usernames and real names from the list. Terms associated with teachers could be categorised mainly into three groups which coincide with those covered in section 5 on exams:

- Emotions/ feelings
- Verbal processes
- Metaphors

I also consider teacher control, a topic which arose in the discourses around exams and is even more evident in discussions of teachers.

6a. Emotions and feelings

Fifty terms relating to emotions and feelings appear in the collocate list:

Table 5: emotion/ feeling terms in the list of collocates of *teacher, categorised into positive and negative (listed in order of MI score)**

positive	negative
thrilled	horrified
smiled	downer
happy	temper
laughing	scarier
loved	puzzled
gratified	downer
delighted	dismayed
happily	annoyingly
laughed	traumatised
delight	baffled
liking	doubts
delighted	exhausting
keen	phobia
satisfied	irrational
proud	annoyance
fond	apprehensive
smiles	dreaded
enjoyed	devastated
pleasantly	doubt
impressed	overwhelmed
amazed	confuse
enjoys	forgetting
courage	frustrated
motivated	annoying
liked	fear
	shocked
	crazy

As with exams, there is a mixture of strong and 'milder' emotions, but here there is a much more balanced distribution between positive and negative, with the negative terms only just outnumbering the positive. However, some apparently positive terms in fact relate to negative experiences, e.g. 'my teacher was amazed at how bad my scales were'.

In contrast with the emotions expressed around exams, some of the apparently 'stronger' emotions, particularly the negative ones, are preceded by mitigators or otherwise modified to be less 'strong':

'feeling **a bit** overwhelmed at times. My teacher packed so much in...'

'**sort of** commitment phobia in relation to music teachers'

'my teacher was **a bit** shocked'

As with the emotions around exams this may suggest 'low level' concerns or analysis of the learner/ teacher relationship at quite detailed levels. However, there is also evidence of learners describing particularly strong emotional responses to teaching, with apparently 'milder' emotions being preceded by intensifiers or in phrases which heighten their intensity:

'I **really** liked it, my teacher knew I would'

'I **really** enjoyed my lesson. My teacher said...'

'...teacher said he **really** enjoyed my lessons'

'I have **huge** doubt that my teacher...'

Intensifiers are also applied to some 'stronger' emotions':

'I was **totally** amazed that my teacher...'

'I was **so** traumatised by the music teacher'

'I think it horrified my teacher **to the extent that...**'

This intensifying of emotions suggests that some learners have very strong feelings around their relationships with teachers, and their experience of being taught.

6b. Verbal processes

The collocate list contains 28 terms which suggest verbal processes:

Table 6: terms suggesting verbal processes in the list of collocates of *teacher, categorised into positive and negative (listed in order of MI score)**

positive	negative
thanking	whinge
complimented	complain
praising	nags
advise	blame
assures	gloat
praise	demand
reassured	apologised
advised	refused
agreed	warn
compliments	threatened
advised	disagree
encouraged	apologising
praised	begged
	demanding
	shouted

As with the emotion terms, there is a fairly even balance of positive and negative verbal process terms. Most of the positive terms refer to teachers offering support and advice to learners, positioning teachers as 'sayers' of helpful verbal processes. There is a clear sense that learners feel that these positive verbal processes are worth mentioning and reporting on, that praise from teachers is important to them.

On the other hand, the negative verbal processes are split between those undertaken by teachers and those by learners. 'Apologising' is done exclusively by learners - its various forms appear 26 times in the corpus and all refer to apologising to teachers, for example:

'apologising to my teacher about my lack of practice'

'apologised to my teacher for having to tell me the same things'

Learners are also the 'sayers' of *whinge, refuse, begged, complain*, for example:

'I still grizzle and whinge whenever teacher gets the book out'

'I begged my teacher to give those pieces to me'

The 'stronger' negative terms are mostly assigned to teachers:

'my teacher gave me a warn'

'my teacher has threatened to drag me out of the house if I don't turn up at the exam'

'maybe my teacher just nags me about bad habits too much'

This contrast suggests that teachers are sometimes 'feared' and have more of the control in the relationship, whilst learners feel that they have to apologise for 'poor performance'.

These tendencies are also apparent in the metaphorical language apparent in collocates of *teacher**.

6c. Metaphors

The metaphorical language apparent in collocates of *teacher** falls mainly into three groups.

Two of these are similar to those found in the discourses surrounding exams – violence, injury and pain; and metaphors of war. Unlike with exams, metaphors of movement and travel are not so evident, but religious metaphors are prominent.

Violence, injury and pain

Even more so than with exams, collocates of *teacher** include a number of metaphors of violent actions: *pounced, knocks, struck, torn, inflict, flogging, murdering, whip, shreds, struck, chucking*.

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'

'for your teacher to periodically whip out and frighten you with'

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'. This does however point to discussions around whether teachers are friendly or feared.

Some 'violent' 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'.

There is a sense here that learners feel that playing 'badly' (as they perceive it) is somehow injurious to their teacher or to the piece of music itself. This ties in with learners feeling that they need to apologise for poor performance, as discussed in section 6b.

There are also terms referring to pain and injury: *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, a reference to 'cat gut' strings – 'a cat's innards!' which precedes a description of the teacher's skilled playing.

The other terms are used metaphorically, however:

'my teacher was at pains to explain that'

'feel like I'm flogging a dead horse, my teacher suggests...'

As with the similar metaphors used around exams, these themes 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 appear to come under the 'war' theme - *battling, conflicting, lost, revenge, reinforcement*. There are fewer obviously military references here than in the exam discussions (no *bullets* or *targets*) but still a definite theme of 'battle' which overlaps with that of violence and injury. In the same way that learners depict themselves as 'murdering' pieces of music, there is also 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 – something which was apparent in relation to exams. 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'. I discuss this issue of control further in section 6d.

Religion

In section 5d, a teacher is described as ‘an angel’, and a number of collocates of *teacher** are religion-related terms: *saint, saints, faith, spirit, soul, believes*, and (as already mentioned in section 6b) *praise*. Looking at these in context shows these are generally used in fairly conventional metaphorical ways such as ‘my teacher is a saint’ 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 exclusively 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 in teachers – patience and diplomacy – but also somewhat place the teachers on a pedestal which contributes to the discourse of teacher control.

6d. Teacher control

In section 5, I discussed the presence of discourses around learners feeling pressured by teachers to take exams, and the sense that learners do not always feel in control of their own fate in the learning process. The theme of teacher control is also evident in some of the metaphorical language discussed in section 6c. To look more widely at this theme, I used AntConc to produce concordances of *teacher* and *teacher is*. Sorting the concordance by the words to the right of teacher allowed me to search for descriptions of teachers ‘making’ learners do things, for example:

‘my teacher is giving me pieces around Grade 5 standard’

‘my teacher is insisting on changing to...’

‘my teacher is making me play lots of difficult stuff’

‘I think that my teacher is setting me stuff that is way too difficult’

'Good job teacher is strict about what we're doing'

'my teacher is terribly strict and demanding'

The idea that control is in the hands of the teacher is expressed through verbs attributing actions to teachers – *insisting, giving me, making me, setting me* – or through adjectives describing the teacher and their behaviour – *strict, terribly strict and demanding*.

There are only three examples in the corpus of *teacher made me*:

'good lesson today until my teacher made me do improvisation'

'also my teacher made me see that the right thing to do...'

'my teacher made me work on...'

There is a hint here of learners feeling 'forced' to do something, and indeed searching for *force, pushing* and *pushed*, which appear in the collocate list, reveals further instances of teacher control:

'my teacher started to force me into weekly lessons'

'my teacher is pushing me to do...'

'I wanted an easy lesson but my teacher pushed me over the edge'

Searching for examples of *by my teacher* reveals a few instances of passivisation which support this discourse of teacher control:

'exercises recommended by my teacher'

'I have five pieces set by my teacher'

'this one was recommended by my teacher'

'I was told off by my teacher like a teenager'

These show that teachers often set the direction of learning, recommending or 'setting' pieces to work on, with only one example of a strongly negative experience, being 'told off'. There is a sense that learners feel a lack of control, but also that they appreciate teachers' direction – 'my teacher made me see that the right thing to do...' – and *push* is sometimes used in a positive way, e.g. 'I really want to improve so I'm glad my teacher pushes me so hard'.

Two other terms which appear repeatedly in the concordance of *teacher* are *decide(d)* and *asked* - these further support the presence of discourses around teacher/ learner control. The concordance of *teacher* shows fifteen occurrences of *decide/ decided*, which imply

teachers having control of what learners do in lessons, taking the lead on what they learn and when to progress onto different skills or pieces, for example:

- 'let your teacher decide what is best'
- 'Teacher decided there is no point...'
- 'My teacher decided I will have to do two pieces'
- 'Teacher decided it was about time to...'
- 'In my lesson my teacher decided that we would start with...'
- 'my teacher decided these were too hard'
- 'my teacher decided we should look at the grade 3 syllabus'
- 'my teacher decided yesterday that I should take a break from...'

On the other hand, the concordance reveals 24 examples of *my/the teacher asked*, which still imply being given instruction but in a less demanding and more 'cooperative' way, for example:

- 'my teacher asked for the studies I normally do'
- 'my teacher asked me to play the scale...'
- 'my teacher asked me if I would like to do an exam'
- 'my teacher asked me to try a piece from...'
- 'my teacher asked me to practice the next movement'

These examples suggest that some learners feel they have more of a share of the control in their relationship with their teacher.

7. "Life gets in the way" – the influence and impact of families

As well as the influence of teachers, existing studies (e.g. Pitts, 2012; Taylor, 2011) cite family influence and support as being important factors in adult music participation. In section 4, the discussions around age revealed specific issues around learning as an adult, including the idea that 'adult life' makes learning difficult. Thus the theme of family support and the impact of family life is worthy of further investigation.

Internet users often use abbreviations for family members, e.g. DH for husband (the 'D' being 'dear'), DW for wife, DS for son, DD for daughter, and OH for 'other half', so my searches included these as well as full terms such as *wife*, *husband*, etc.

Searching for *DH*, *DW* and *OH* (using a case-sensitive search to exclude uses of the expression *oh*) found 16 occurrences, four of *DH* and twelve of *OH* (none of *DW*). Of these, seven refer

to situations or events in the learners' lives (I do not quote these directly for ethical/anonymity reasons, as discussed in section 3b) which had an impact on their emotional state and sometimes also on their musical progress, for example, not performing well in a lesson because they were upset about a family argument. The remaining nine examples concern the other person's involvement in the learner's musical activities, either practical support ('asked my OH to give me a mock test') or comments on progress ('OH says I sound like I know what I'm doing'). There is also a sense that the presence of family members can be a problem when trying to practise – 'I don't like OH to overhear me', 'DH was at home while I was practicing, and I felt shy' – and mentions of other people's expectations, e.g. 'DH was expecting a polished performance'.

Searching for *partner* finds seven occurrences, of which five refer to musical partners – 'my duet partner' – and only two to personal relationships. These two examples describe limitations to learners' musical progress, such as lack of practice time because 'I have a full-time job, two children and a partner'.

There are 17 occurrences of *husband* in the corpus, of which eight refer to positive support from husbands, two to supporting a husband who is learning music himself, four to family situations/ events (including their impact on music learning) and three to negative reactions from husbands to music learning, e.g. 'negativity from my husband'. Meanwhile *wife* occurs just seven times, with one of these being a learner referring to herself. This may suggest that more of the adult learners posting online are women, or it may be that women are more likely to mention family and relationships. Of these seven occurrences, two contribute to the discourse of 'busy adult lives' and their impact on music learning, e.g. 'life took over – job, wife and three children'. The remaining examples all describe wives who are supportive of music learning.

Of the abbreviations for children, *DS* appears just once and *DD* seven times in the corpus, but all of these refer to the children's own musical activities, with no references to children's attitudes to their parents' learning. Perhaps having children who play instruments is an influence on adults starting or continuing to learn music, and certainly a search for *family* finds evidence of different generations making music together. Of 55 occurrences of *family*, ten refer to family music-making, e.g. describing playing together or a 'family outing' with several family members of different ages taking exams on the same day. There are also eight occurrences which describe families' attitudes to the adult's music learning, a mixture of

positive – ‘I love that your family are giving you great support’ – and negative – ‘my family don’t understand’.

However, twenty of the instances of *family* refer to the idea that ‘life gets in the way’ of learning an instrument, for example:

‘I haven’t practised properly due to illness, family etc’

‘Practice has been minimal due to work, family commitments’

‘As an adult with family responsibilities, it is difficult...’

Clearly, discourses around family support and influences are evident in the corpus, with a mixture of positive (support, playing together as a family) and negative (criticism, lack of understanding, restricting progress in music learning).

8. Conclusion

8a. Outcome and implications

This study demonstrates the potential of corpus-based discourse analysis in the realm of music education. There is clear evidence that adult learners consider themselves as members of an ‘identity group’ with their own particular needs and challenges. Throughout the analysis, there is evidence of a range of emotions associated with music learning – positive and negative, from subtle to strong.

The discourses evident around ‘age’ support the findings of existing research, that adults face preconceptions and expectations (from themselves and others) around their abilities to learn music, and challenges around fitting in learning with ‘adult life’, echoing the findings of the previous research discussed in my literature review. There is also discussion around challenging these preconceptions, and indeed the advantages of learning as an adult.

Although teachers may find that adults are ‘not as interested’ in taking exams (section 3c.ii), and it is not a prominent theme in existing research, this study shows that certainly amongst those learners who contribute to online discussions there is a lot of interest – even if that interest eventually leads to a decision not to follow the exam route. Exams are associated with strong emotions, and metaphors of pain, war, travel/ movement and sport, suggesting that they are seen as a ‘journey’ fraught with difficulties, but also something to be achieved or ‘won’. The journey may not be taken entirely voluntarily, as there is evidence of pressure from teachers. For those who take exams, support is crucial, ideally from teachers, friendly examiners, and the online community.

In terms of support throughout the learning process, it is clear that learners see the relationship with their teacher as crucial. They express their need for support, patience and understanding from teachers. There is also often a sense that they want to impress and please teachers, and apologise for 'not doing well'. Whilst the teachers in my survey (section 3c.ii) describe the 'skills' they think are necessary for teaching adults, the learners themselves seem to focus on what they see as the 'qualities' of teachers, and the way that being taught makes them feel, with a wide range of emotional responses. There is evidence that learners appreciate some aspects of teaching which might seem initially negative, such as 'strictness' and allowing teachers to make the decisions, but there are clear issues around the balance of control between teacher and learner.

There is evidence that some learners consider their families to be supportive, but some perceive negativity or lack of understanding. As discussed in section 5, support from the online community is clearly evident throughout, and perhaps this is a reason why some adult music learners post online – to make up for a lack of 'real life' support by discussing and sharing their experiences with others who belong to the same group. There is also a very clear theme that having a family impacts on adults' music learning in terms of time for practising and having other responsibilities to consider.

These findings have the potential to inform music educators, influencing the way individual teachers work with adults, and the guidance given by organisations who offer music education training. They may also be useful to music exam boards when considering how to meet the needs of adult learners, and to community music organisations who are seeking to engage with and support adults.

8b. Limitations

The most obvious limitation to this study is that it only includes learners who post online, and excludes those who do not contribute to blogs or forums. I cannot therefore claim that it is representative of all adult music learners.

There are further issues with using a corpus of online data. It is difficult to ascertain 'tone of voice' (a commonly cited problem with online communications). For example, learners may be exaggerating their 'fear' of teachers. It is also difficult to follow 'running jokes' which may explain certain discourses in an online community. Unlike an interview situation, there is no opportunity to ask for clarification from participants. It could be argued that the problems

associated with biographical research approaches also 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 and more ‘traditional’ music education research techniques such as surveys, biographies or interviews, in order to gain a fuller picture of adult learners.

Even within the realm of corpus-based discourse analysis, there is potential for more in-depth research. AntConc, whilst incredibly useful for this type of study and far easier than manual searching, does have limited functionality. Corpus tools with part-of-speech (POS) or semantic tagging and more statistical analysis options would enable further investigation of the text using other aspects of discourse analysis such as passivisation, modality and transitivity.

8c. Potential for further research

As I mention above, there is potential to make further use of corpus techniques in this area. In particular, combining corpus-based analysis with other research techniques has the potential to enable a truly in-depth study of adult learners. It was evident from the corpus that emoticons were used frequently, and it would be useful to investigate further these multi-modal aspects of the online texts. This might go some way to revealing the implied ‘tone of voice’, as discussed above.

It would also be informative to take a similar approach to textual data from music teachers, which would allow comparison between teachers’ approaches to adult learners and the views of the learners themselves. This could include analysis of the language used in books, journal and magazine articles on adult music learners, as well as online data from teachers. Equally, comparison with the discourses of younger music learners could reveal whether the views and challenges highlighted here are indeed unique to adult learners.

It would be useful to investigate whether the differences in discourses (for example positive and negative experiences of exams) relate to different groups of adult learners, for example comparing the experiences of taught versus self-taught learners, or those who start as an adult versus those who return to learning after a break. Further considerations include differences in genres (e.g. classical/folk), different age groups within the wide range of ‘adult’ and whether discourses differ in different cultures or countries. These techniques could equally be applied to other aspects of music education research, for example the discourses around ‘talent’ mentioned in the literature review.

In summary, linguistic techniques, and in particular corpus-based discourse analysis, have the potential to make a significant – and previously unexplored – contribution to music education research, and thus to benefit educators and learners.

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