Language Development Through Work

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses practitioner-led UK action research into ways to support learning in low-skill, low-pay workplaces, including how to help migrant workers learn English. The research, carried out between 2003 and 2011, consisted of four loosely linked projects. The first (2003-4) developed a bite-size curriculum for workplace language coaching. The second (2005-9) explored the potential of work activity itself as a vehicle for language learning. The third (2006-10) examined ways to motivate and enable operational managers to support workplace learning, while the fourth (2010-2011) investigated how to utilise informal peer learning for language development at work. Taken together, findings from these projects suggest a practical model for learning in low-skill, low-pay workplaces.

2. Research context

The larger context for this research was the UK government's workforce skills strategy. This strategy was based on an analysis that equated national economic competitiveness with productivity and related productivity, at least in part, to workforce skills. Referencing OECD comparisons of international productivity levels and workforce skills, UK policy makers concluded that the UK suffered from "serious deficiencies in basic and intermediate skills" and that "improvements in skills levels [were] not reaching those with lowest skills fast enough" (PIU 2001:16).

Government concern over low skills and in particular poor adult basic skills (i.e. adult literacy, English language and numeracy) had been stimulated partly by the International Adult Literacy Surveys of the mid 1990s (OECD 1995, 1997, 2000). IALS defined adult literacy broadly as basic information processing ability and investigated standards in a range of OECD member states including the UK. It found significant correlations between workforce literacy levels and national economic performance. It also suggested UK workforce literacy levels were below many of its competitor nations.

At a time when information technology and globalisation were transforming national economies, these findings caught the attention of UK policy makers. A year after coming to power in 1997, Tony Blair's modernising Labour government asked the distinguished statistician, Sir Claus Moser, to lead an investigation into standards of adult literacy and numeracy in the UK. Moser's committee issued its report in 1999 with some very stark headline findings: one in five adults in the UK

– about seven million people – lacked the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old. Problems with numeracy were even worse. Drawing on IALS, Moser concluded that this "shocking situation" was "one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy" (DfEE 1999: 1). Additionally,

> it cramps the lives of millions of people. We owe it to them to remedy at public expense the shortcomings of the past. To do so should be a priority for Government, and for all those, in the business world or elsewhere, who can help (ibid.).

The Moser report recommended that "the Government should commit itself to the virtual elimination of functional illiteracy and innumeracy" (DfEE 1999: 9). It made detailed recommendations for a complete overhaul of adult basic skills teaching in the UK, including national targets for the number of adults to improve their basic skills year on year for the next decade.

The government accepted the great majority of Moser's recommendations and, two years later, launched a national strategy to improve adult basic skills. The strategy, known as *Skills for Life* was clear about both the scale of the problem and the economic case for public investment to rectify it:

> Seven million people have poor literacy and numeracy skills, including around half a million or more who struggle with English because it is not their first language. This has disastrous consequences for the individuals concerned, weakens the country's ability to compete in the global economy and places an enormous burden on society (DfEE 2001: 1)

Over the next decade, the government invested almost £10 billion to improve basic skills (cf. House of Commons 2005, 2009). National standards were written to define competency in adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages. National qualifications and official teaching curricula were created for each skill. Teachers were retrained. All adults who lacked qualifications in literacy, English language or numeracy were offered free instruction to enable them to pass a standardised test and gain the new national qualification. In return for this investment, the government wanted adult education providers to meet a series of qualification targets, ensuring that by 2010 two and a quarter million adults had gained their first qualification in literacy, numeracy or English language (cf. National Audit Office 2008: 8).

Moser, noting that "few employers take a constructive approach to advancing basic skills in their workforce" (DfEE 1999: 3), had asserted that targets would "only be achievable if employers generally agree to play their part" (DfEE 1999: 4) and recommended that workplace basic skills classes be free to employers. To address the "very important problem [of] how to ensure that busy employees have enough time for intensive study," Moser recommended paying employers replacement costs for releasing workers to attend classes during work time (cf. DfEE 1999: 6).

The government, while not offering replacement costs for staff, did make workplace basic skills free to employers and published a resource to encourage employer engagement (DfES 2002).

The government's strategy succeeded in significantly raising public awareness of basic skills; it created a professional basic skills teaching infrastructure; and it met its qualification targets. Where it failed was in the workplace. Here basic skills learning programmes proved difficult to set up and even harder to sustain.

By 2008, longitudinal research was reporting that workplace basic skills programmes had made little impact on skills and no impact on productivity. The government's approach was characterised as inefficient and impractical, at odds with the workplace environment (cf. Wolf et al 2008; Waite, Evans & Kersh 2011). To draw down enough government funding to cover their costs, learning providers needed to assemble groups of eight to ten learners for each class; they also needed those learners to gain one of the national qualifications. The problems Moser had foreseen around staff release proved all too real. For most employers replacement staffing was not available, even if the government had been willing to pay for it. Releasing classroom groups was simply impossible. Moreover employers questioned the relevance of qualifications for employees in roles that required no qualifications.

3. Putting policy into practice, 2002

To see what this looked like from the practitioner's perspective, let us return to 2002 and a workplace basic skills programme that colleagues and I were delivering to ancillary staff (i.e. staff responsible for cleaning, portering and other non-clinical support services) at a large National Health Service hospital in south-east England. Some of these staff were directly employed by the hospital. Others were employed by private companies contracted by the hospital to provide services. One such company was contracted to provide food service and some cleaning.

With these various employers at the hospital we agreed a programme that offered staff ten hours of learning in literacy (including basic IT skills), numeracy or English language. This programme would be delivered through weekly one-hour classes held on hospital premises. In line with government policy, classes would be free to both employees and employers, though employers would allow staff to attend during paid work time.

Many of the support staff employed at the hospital – over 50% in some areas – were migrant workers (from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America), often with limited English language skills. This was the case with the company providing food service, whose staff were eager to attend our language classes. We enrolled some 20 learners. The company identified the least busy time of day and set aside an area in the hospital restaurant for us to deliver a class.

For all concerned, it proved a frustrating experience. Of the 20 learners, in any given week a significant proportion would not even be at work (due to shift patterns, sickness and holiday leave). Of those who were at work, very few could actually be released. Like most low skill, low pay workplaces, this one was fairly chaotic. To contain costs, the company employed the bare minimum of staff needed to deliver the service, paid them as little as possible and invested as little as possible in their training. Managers were treated little better. In a time of high employment, staff turnover was high and recruitment difficult. Managers spent their days fire-fighting (i.e. running from problem to problem). As a result, it was rare for more than three or four learners to attend class and rare for the same learner to attend class two weeks running.

This raised difficult questions regarding curriculum design, continuity of learning, learner progress and, for all concerned, impact – there was little evident benefit to learners, their employer or service users (i.e. patients and hospital visitors). All of which was discouraging to learners, their employer and to us. Clearly, to make any significant impact we would need to develop a different approach. This led to the first piece of action research.

4. Moving beyond the classroom, 2003-4

It was clear to us that, to be effective, any new approach must respect the constraints of the workplace. First and foremost of these was the employer's inability to release classroom groups of staff for meaningful amounts of time. The recognition that classroom learning was not a practical option led us to a simple, but transformative, insight: work activity itself is full of opportunities for the worker to acquire language. Instead of trying to take workers away from work so that we could teach them language, perhaps we should be helping them to learn language while they worked. This would also resolve our difficulty over curriculum. Workplace activity would be the curriculum. While no worker had whole hours free for classroom learning, every worker had regular short lulls in activity of five, ten, even 15 minutes, often at predictable times. This was potentially ideal for short, individual coaching sessions, two or three times a week. This implied a programme structured around dip-in, dip-out learning, driven by – or at least flexible enough to accommodate – the learner's work-related concerns of the moment, while retaining coherence and a sense of progression.

With staff and their managers, we identified nine topics, e.g. 'Dealing with instructions', 'Talking about Health and Safety', 'Feedback', 'Being part of a team'. (Those topics reflect the fact that workplace interaction arises quite as much from the worker's role as from his or her tasks.) Within each topic we identified learning points such as 'Explaining', 'Asking for help', 'Avoiding a risk' and 'When the job's done'. We mapped these topics and their learning points (60 in all) into a functional

syllabus. For each of our 60 learning 'bites' we produced a pocket-sized card that included a lexical set, grammatical structures (mostly at Common European Framework Level B1), advice on the culture of the British workplace, and a scenario illustrating language use.

This gave us a curriculum with structure and coherence, but also flexibility. There was no set starting or finishing point. One could study these learning points in any order (allowing us to respond to the learner's immediate priority). Moreover, new learning points and topics could easily be incorporated.

Armed with a set of these cards, the teacher would meet the learner in the learner's work area at a convenient time. The learner would select a topic area and learning card to focus on. The teacher would go through the card with the learner, explaining concepts, discussing workplace application, modelling pronunciation etc. Together learner and teacher would agree what aspect of the card the learner would focus on over the next couple of days. The teacher would suggest learning activities to help the learner and fix an appointment say two days later to check the learner's progress. The teacher would leave the card with the learner. At the next appointment, learner and teacher would decide either to keep working on the card or move on to another.

In addition to this programme-led learning, we hoped our cards would support language acquisition in other ways. Migrant workers are exposed to language all the time they are working. They receive input from colleagues, managers and customers, who model, mentor and inform as well as directly instruct. We hoped our cards would make this input more accessible to learners, improving their ability to learn independently.

We hoped also that our cards would support peer-learning. This might be a case of two migrants working on a card together or it might be a case of a native speaker using the card to mentor a migrant colleague. Finally, we hoped our cards would be used by management within their day-to-day supervision of work activity.

We piloted our programme over a ten-week period. Our team of six teachers enrolled 26 learners and delivered 230 brief sessions, all in work areas, including corridors and kitchens. These short sessions proved easy to fit into work routines without disrupting the delivery of services or increasing the workload of those staff who were not participating in the programme. Most sessions were 1:1 although in some instances other workers spontaneously joined the enrolled learner.

The learning cards proved popular. Content was judged relevant and at the right level of difficulty. About two thirds of our learners reported showing the cards to others and half reported using the cards themselves to teach other people. Managers reported that, as well as speaking more English, workers showed more confidence (e.g. using initiative, opening conversations) and more knowledge of workplace conventions. In their view, the programme had raised morale and

reduced absenteeism. Managers and staff both reported that it was useful to have language teachers in the workplace – someone who had the time to help talk through a problem, language-based or otherwise, with either staff or managers. To the extent that this led employees to perceive their workplace as a supportive one, it benefited their employer too. Reaction from our teachers was also strongly positive. Regarding the methodology, one said: "Fifteen minutes is just about right for discussing the situation and teaching and practising a couple of useful exponents to the point that they stick. I'm yet to be convinced that more can be done in an hour" (Arakelian & Braddell 2005). As a learning provider, we found that sending our teachers directly into the work area greatly increased their understanding of learners' work-related needs, helped them build valuable rapport with managers and enabled them to attract new learners (through contact with staff we had not met previously).

In respect of access to learners, curriculum design, continuity of learning, learner progress and impact, the pilot was remarkably successful. Where it was less successful, we felt, was in its reliance on teacher-mediation. We had the benefit of a small research grant from the health service. Under normal circumstances, it would have been too expensive to pay teachers to work in this way – however effective the results. We also noticed that managers and supervisors did not appear to see the learning card system as one they could operate themselves.

5. Further investigations, 2005-11

The government's national strategy for improving adult basic skills defined the skills as transferrable 'skills for life' with standardised specifications. Learning needs were defined by the strategy's qualification targets: any adult who lacked the qualifications that the strategy used as a proxy for adult basic skills, had a 'need' for the learning that led to those qualifications. Workplace classes were merely a convenient way to reach adults who would not enrol in a college class outside of work. Workplace classes would be delivered by adult education teachers along the same lines as they were in adult education colleges. That these learners were also workers was merely incidental. The employers who hosted workplace classes would benefit by osmosis, as their employees gained better basic skills, but nothing more.

The impracticality of classroom-based learning for workers in low-skill, low-pay roles and the consequent lack of impact had prompted us to experiment with workplace coaching. Its successes – and its shortcomings – led us now to reflect on the possibility of taking a workplace learning approach to workplace basic skills learning.

We knew from our own experience of the low-skill, low-pay workplace that basic communication and information processing skills mattered to individual workers

and to the organisation overall. They were skills that underpinned task fulfilment, team working and customer service, change management and everything else that happened at work. We knew support with communication and information processing was welcomed by workers and managers both. Workplace learning is how organisations ensure workers (including managers) have the skills their jobs demand. It encompasses much more than off-the-job training. As well as coaching and informal peer learning, it includes supervision and all the other management systems organisations use to organise work activity.

Our workplace coaching project had harnessed some of these learning opportunities, but it had remained external to the employer-organisation's own work management systems and, as a result, unsustainably expensive (due to the teaching cost). Might we achieve a more sustainable approach by harnessing these organisational systems to support workplace basic skills learning? This question provided the focus for the three other pieces of research described here.

The first, *Learning through Work* (2005-9), started from a simple hypothesis: the basic skills that matter at work are the skills that work activity demands of workers. The demand to use the skill creates an opportunity to practise the skill. Insofar as the opportunity to practise creates an opportunity to learn, work activity itself is a potential basic skills learning opportunity. Employer-organisations support work activity (i.e. task and role) with people and performance management systems. Might on-the-job learning linked to the employer organisation's people and performance management systems offer a practical, sustainable and inclusive approach to workplace basic skills learning?

With support from several government agencies, the project brought together employers, academic researchers and workplace basic skills practitioners to explore on-the-job learning opportunities in about fifty low-skill, low-pay workplaces in south-east England (cf. Braddell 2009). The project included literature reviews (cf. Newton et al, 2006; Wallis, Panagiotakopoulos & Stuart 2007), an audit of workplace practices (cf. Newton, Miller & Braddell 2006) and practitioner-led trials of on-the-job basic skills learning (cf. Stuart & Winterton 2009).

The audit found plentiful evidence that low-skill, low-pay work requires communication and information processing skills and so does offer practice and learning opportunities. It also found many examples of poor communication and information processing impacting negatively on work teams' performance. As skills, however, communication and information processing appeared invisible to employers, who neither specified nor supported the skills, focusing instead on outcomes alone: task fulfilment and collective performance.

In the trials that followed, a common approach emerged, consisting of on-the-job guidance, supported by materials and mentoring (cf. Stuart & Winterton 2009).

The practitioners identified where work activity required basic skills; helped the employer to specify target behaviours (e.g. how managers and staff should interact with each other and/or customers); diagnosed problems associated with current practices (i.e. how and why actual behaviour departed from target behaviour); created a text that described the target behaviour in a way accessible to all members of the work group; and finally, developed workplace mentors (e.g. a supervisor) able to communicate the text to staff. From one of these trials, the project published an exemplary on-the-job learning resource (cf. Leadbetter 2009).

While this on-the-job learning project was in progress, an opportunity to investigate the manager's role in workplace basic skills learning arose in the adult social care sector. Conscious that research suggested that at least 20% of social care workers lacked literacy and numeracy while another 20% had limited English language skills (cf. Eborall 2004), the government agencies responsible for knowledge and skills in the social care sector commissioned a project to address these needs.

The project recruited a nationally representative sample of employers and, again using workplace basic skills practitioners, investigated employer practices and perceptions around basic skills. Findings suggested that managers were well aware of basic skills-related performance problems, but lacked the confidence, expertise and resources to address them (cf. Braddell & Dunn 2006). Typically the managers regarded basic skills as a difficult, socially stigmatised, educational problem that required remediation from a specialist (casting the government's basic skills awareness-raising in an interesting light). Even with access to such expertise, releasing staff to attend basic skills classes would be impractical. As a result, managers tended to live with basic skills problems rather than seeking to address them – a finding consistent with our experiences in other sectors. Managers expressed a willingness to engage with basic skills issues providing this could be done within existing constraints. Their motivation to do this related to concern for the overall quality of the care their organisation delivered, rather than any concern to develop individual staff.

In response, the project developed a web-based resource for managers. This resource redefined basic skills as social care communication and number skills and provided tools to enable managers to check staff skills in a safe, constructive manner and then take appropriate action to manage risk and support skills development. In trials of the resource, facilitated by practitioners, managers responded positively (cf. Braddell & Dunn 2007). In 2009 the resource was launched nationally (*Care Skillsbase* 2009) and user statistics indicate it remains well-used by managers acting independently, without support from learning providers.

The final project (2010-11) was sponsored by the government agency responsible for the skills of the adult social care workforce. This project drew on the findings of both the *Learning through Work* and the *Care Skillsbase* projects to investigate the potential of informal workplace basic skills learning. It aimed to inform and support the interactions staff have around work activity. In consultation with employers, a set of learning materials in a pocket-sized booklet format were developed to support workplace 'learning conversations' between staff (cf. Braddell 2011). These materials offered accessible explanations of why and how communication and number skills are used in care work and included a focus on workplace language for migrant workers. They were designed for workplace use by staff, unmediated by a learning provider. When trialled in workplaces the booklets received strongly positive feedback from both staff and employers. One manager commented: "Excellent... flexible and meets all levels of need. [The only problem we had was] trying to get the books back to pass on. [Staff] wanted to keep them" (Braddell 2010).

6. A practical model for workplace basic skills learning?

The research described here suggests that:

- To work safely and meet quality standards workers in low-skill, low-pay roles need basic skills (i.e. the ability to communicate and process information effectively).
- Problems related to communication and information processing arise frequently in the low-skill, low-pay workplace – many workers have limited literacy, English language and numeracy skills.
- Despite this, basic skills remain largely invisible (i.e. unspecified, unsupported) to employers.
- Managers may be aware of performance problems arising from poor basic skills, but tend to accept these problems as a given and work around them, not least because they lack the confidence, expertise and resources (including time) to address them.
- Employers and managers are motivated by collective performance outcomes, rather than personal development or basic skills qualifications for workers.
- To impact on collective performance, learning needs to change workplace behaviour. For this to happen learning must focus directly on work activity and it must involve managers.
- Managers (and workers) tend to see work activity in terms of tasks not skill. It is helpful, therefore, to focus on the task application of basic skills (e.g. exactly what to say to the customer) rather than the abstracted skill (e.g. speaking politely).

- Employers, managers and staff welcome external support, provided that the support is tailored to the actual needs of the workplace and delivered within the existing constraints of the workplace.
- Low-skill, low-pay workplaces tend to be under-resourced and chaotic, with very limited access to learning for staff – off-the-job basic skills learning in classroom groups is not practical.
- Work activity presents good opportunity for on-the-job basic skills learning, including informal learning, linked to and supportive of organisations' existing systems of people and performance management.
- Linking basic skills learning directly to work activity maximises impact on collective performance and organisational outcomes (the factors that motivate employers). It also addresses the problem of staff release.
- At its simplest, a workplace learning approach involves making the skills visible to managers and staff, supporting on-the-job and informal learning.
- In this approach, the practitioner's role is to facilitate, rather than deliver, learning.

In summary, there is significant need for learning in the low-skill, low-pay workplace. It is difficult to address this need through conventional adult education classes in the workplace. A workplace learning approach is practical. By linking learning to the management of work activity (a collective process in which all take part), learning directly supports performance in a way that is motivating to employers. This sort of systematic, collective learning is inclusive and available to all – it transforms the workplace into a learning space. Employers lack the awareness, expertise and resources to do this on their own. They need help from practitioners who combine expertise in adult basic education with an understanding of workplace dynamics – help to facilitate the learning that should arise naturally from work.

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