

## Interactions and miscommunication in the Swiss vocational education context: Researching vocational learning from a linguistic perspective

*Laurent Filliettaz*

### Abstract

*This paper identifies and discusses various challenges met by apprentices when joining the workplace at the very beginning of their training programme. These challenges have become of interest to policy makers and vocational researchers in a context where transitions from school to work are often seen as problematic experiences with growing numbers of young people dropping out of apprenticeship programmes. In a case study drawn from empirical data referring to the Swiss vocational education system, difficulties in sharing meaning at various levels and in (re)negotiating participation at work are described as typical patterns of interactions between apprentices and expert coworkers who train them. These challenges, it is proposed, are not external to language use, but are deeply mediated by discourse practices, including a variety of semiotic resources. From that standpoint, concepts and methods developed in the field of applied linguistics can be seen as relevant tools for illuminating the complexities associated with workplace learning. The paper explores possible continuities and complementarities between vocational education research and discourse studies and argues for an increased research effort in this field of applied linguistics.*

KEYWORDS: APPRENTICESHIP; TRANSITION; INTERACTION; DISCOURSE; WORKPLACE LEARNING; IDENTITY

---

### Contact author

Laurent Filliettaz: University of Geneva, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, 40, Boul. du Pont d'Arve,  
CH-1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland  
email: Laurent.Filliettaz@unige.ch

## 1 Introduction

For some decades, various frameworks in discourse and interactional studies have found fruitful applications in a wide range of social practices, some of them closely related to education. But surprisingly, the field of vocational education has not attracted considerable attention. Linguists interested in education have mainly focused their investigation on school institutions and classroom practices (Rex *et al.* 2006 for a review), whereas linguists involved in workplace studies have not been primarily interested in education and have often failed to approach the workplace as a site for learning or training (Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Candlin 2002; Sarangi and Candlin 2003; Mondada 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini 2009). Reciprocally, it should be noted that vocational education researchers have remained remarkably distant from linguistic perspectives. Except for recent contributions to this emergent field (Collin and Valleala 2005), qualitative methods prevailing in vocational education often take the form of research interviews or ethnographic observation, but do not refer to interaction or discourse analytic tools in a systematic way.

In contrast with this reality, there seems to be a growing need for exploring continuities between vocational education research and applied linguistics perspectives. How do people gain access to vocational knowledge and build up skills and competencies? How do they expand their repertoires of learning experiences once they leave school? How do they undergo identity changes? These questions and many more have been addressed frequently by researchers interested in vocational learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Billett 2001). The perspectives from language and linguistics, one could argue, are certainly not external to these issues. Learning to work and becoming a member of professional communities very much rely on discourse and interaction. These discourses provide accounts of the ways individuals engage with the process of training and learning, and can be regarded as valuable methodological resources for understanding the complex processes associated with vocational education. Given this theoretical and methodological background, it seems highly promising to explore the possible connections existing between vocational education research and concepts and analytic tools provided by various strands in applied linguistics.

It is precisely the aim of this paper to tighten the links between these disciplines and to apply a linguistic lens to research questions that have gained interest for vocational educationalists. To do so, a specific educational context – initial vocational education and training in Switzerland – will be investigated. In Switzerland, apprenticeship programmes have for a long time been seen as effective training solutions. Nevertheless, in the past few years, the ability of these programmes to adapt to both economic and educational contingencies

has been questioned. The capacity of school leavers at upper secondary level to fulfil the requirements of productive tasks has recurrently been contested, as has been the ability of workplaces to provide adequate learning conditions for these apprentices (Gonon 2005).

Given this particular context, this paper aims at a better understanding of the difficulties encountered by apprentices when they move out of the school system and face the contingencies of the workplace: what sorts of challenges are apprentices facing when engaging in productive tasks at the beginning of their training programmes? How do experienced workers guide them in such productive tasks? And how is such guidance related to language use and discourse practices?

These issues and questions will be addressed by referring to a research programme in which an important database of verbal and non-verbal interactions between apprentices and expert workers has been collected. A detailed analysis of sequences of these data conducted from a discursive and interactional perspective will aim to bring insights to these issues, and illustrate the difficulties experienced by a first-year apprentice when interacting with colleagues in the workplace at the beginning of his training programme.

## **2 From school to work: Understanding problematic transitions**

Switzerland is often acknowledged positively in comparative surveys for its long-standing and widely encompassing apprenticeship programmes (Dubs 2006). These programmes attract a substantial proportion of the population and hence play a central role in the educational system. After completion of compulsory education at lower secondary level, 65% of the students enrol in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system and only one-third specialize in general education at upper-secondary and tertiary levels. Apprenticeship programmes proposed in what has been termed the 'dual training model' remain the predominant form of training. These apprenticeship programmes are strongly oriented towards practice and combine school-based teaching with practical experience built into productive conditions at the workplace. For a long time, the 'dual' pathway has been seen as an effective solution for securing smooth transitions from school to work, and from education to employment.

Nevertheless, during the past few years, recurrent problems have emerged in this field of education. According to a recent longitudinal survey conducted in Switzerland (cf. Stalder and Nägele 2011), between 20% and 40% of apprentices who enter the dual VET system do not complete their apprenticeship within the stated terms of their contracts. Of these, 9% change occupation, 11% have to repeat a year or change to another occupation, 7% change the

training company, and 7% drop out from the apprenticeship system without having any immediate alternative pathway.

Given these circumstances, it has become crucial to gain a better understanding of the causes leading to young people dropping out or making changes in apprenticeship programmes. Recent research conducted in this area by Lamamra and Masdonati (2009) has, for instance, investigated the reasons mentioned by apprentices who had interrupted their apprenticeship before completion. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted with apprentices, this study concludes that poor working conditions, low support by trainers and workplace relations emerge as the main causes of dropout. Half of the apprentices interviewed reported conflict in their relations with their colleagues or supervisors and complained about insufficient training opportunities in the workplace.

The conditions in which apprentices progressively enter working lives should not be regarded exclusively as the result of mere local contextual contingencies. There are also global theoretical explanations that illuminate problematic transitions, and which are well documented in the vocational training literature. These considerations deal with the sorts of knowledge students have to learn when experiencing transition from school to work, with identity issues related to the transition process itself and with the specificities of the curricula proposed in initial vocational training.

When engaging in apprenticeship programmes, students face, for instance, new conditions regarding the sorts of knowledge they are expected to acquire. In addition to the codified and disciplinary knowledge that are central to school institutions, apprentices have to engage with complex forms of work-based knowledge that include conceptual, procedural and dispositional dimensions (Billett 2001). This affects not only knowledge acquisition but also the ways apprentices position themselves in the social practices they engage in. Anthropologists like Lave and Wenger (1991) have, for instance, long stressed the idea that vocational learning 'implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations' (p. 52). Consequently, identity issues are a key component of transitions from school to work. Apprentices do not only have to master new knowledge and skills. They are also expected to become members of new communities of practice and to position themselves in a complex network of relations involving other apprentices, teachers, trainers and co-workers (Wenger 1998).

Interestingly, concepts and methods developed by discourse and interaction analysts are integral to the issues mentioned above. Like vocational education researchers, linguists have been struggling with issues related to knowledge acquisition, identity construction and interpersonal relations. They have described how these issues shape learning, not as an abstract cognitive process,

but as naturally occurring actions enacted in language and interaction. Consequently, a discursive and interactional approach has much to afford to an in-depth investigation focused on problematic transitions in apprenticeship programmes, as long as they are conceptualized as the product of ongoing social practices and not as abstract macrosociological processes.

### 3 Interactions in vocational training contexts: Theory, methodology and data

A research programme initiated in 2005 at University of Geneva links vocational education research with linguistics methods (Fillietaz *et al.* 2008; de Saint-Georges and Fillietaz 2008). The overall purpose of this research programme is to contribute to a more informed understanding of the real conditions in which training and learning occur within the Swiss 'dual' VET system. The research aims at describing how apprentices engage in learning and develop professional identities in the various contexts in which training takes place.

Based on the premise that vocational training and learning are sustained through language use in context, the research pays special attention to discourse and interaction. We investigate the verbal and nonverbal interactions between apprentices and trainers. Our methodology draws on concepts in interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982), conversation analysis (Sacks *et al.* 1978; Goodwin 2000), and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress *et al.* 2001; Levine and Scollon 2004). These trends have explored multiple avenues of linguistics and are often seen as developing competing or contradictory frameworks for analysing discourse and interaction. Nevertheless, these frameworks also share common assumptions about language and social life. In particular, they view language as an historical and culturally shaped medium by which individuals take actions, achieve cooperation, participate in social events and align identities by engaging in complex meaning-making processes.

Above all, there are evident epistemological continuities between these frameworks and what vocational educationists have recurrently identified as central properties of training and learning processes, namely their *situated*, *collective*, *dynamic* and *multimodal* nature. Numerous cognitive scientists and anthropologists (Lave 1988; Wenger 1998) have proposed that learning is very much a situated process that takes place in action, and is intrinsically bound to material, cultural and institutional environments. These material and social conditions may afford opportunities for learning. They may also, as pointed out by Billett (2001: 87), limit the learning potentialities associated with specific work environments. Amongst the learning potentialities afforded

by workplace environments, the existence of expertise and the willingness of experts to provide direct or indirect guidance to newcomers appear as important conditions for workplace learning. As mentioned again by Billett (2001), 'the quality of direct interaction accessible in a workplace is a key determinant in the quality of learning outcomes' (p. 35). Learning then is best conceptualized as a guided and collective elaboration rather than as an individual process. Such a joint elaboration unfolds in time, both at a microscopic level and more at macroscopic levels of organization (Erickson 2004). It requires local negotiation between participants as well as change over larger time-scales, as pointed out recently by de Saint-Georges and Filliettaz (2008). Finally, current trends in educational sciences have proposed approaching teaching and learning practices as meaning making processes in which a plurality of semiotic modes are combined and finely articulated (Kress *et al.* 2001). These trends have stressed the semiotic nature of learning and investigate the multimodal organization underlying classroom interactions.

Consistent with these premises, linguistic approaches to discourse and interaction provide complementary frameworks for describing the situated, collective, dynamic and multimodal dimensions of language use. These frameworks can be fruitfully combined, we believe, in order to investigate the complex features of vocational training interactions. For instance, the specific analytic mentality promoted by Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) and Conversation Analysis (CA) can be helpful in describing how the systems of relations and identities proper to apprenticeship programmes are being enacted and negotiated in ordinary interactions. Politeness theory (Goffman 1974; Brown and Levinson 1987) and frame analysis (Goffman 1974) can support fine-grained descriptions of the ways participants shape rapport and achieve a joint understanding of the local context in which they engage. Moreover, the specific lens of ethnomethodology may illuminate how apprentices and trainers orient to each other and make their contributions jointly accountable as interaction dynamically unfolds. Finally, insights coming from multimodal discourse and interaction analysis (Goodwin 2000; Norris 2004) remind us that language and speech are only part of the complex arrangement of semiotic resources combined in vocational training interactions. They can be seen as useful contributions to investigate the variety of semiotic systems used by apprentices and trainers as they engage in joint actions.

In line with the approach presented above, data collection was conducted in the form of ethnographic observation of a group of approximately 40 apprentices engaged in three different technical trades: car mechanics, automation and electricity. Observation took place in naturally occurring training conditions in the Geneva area. Apprentices were observed in the various settings in which their training took place, namely vocational schools, private training

centres governed by professional associations, and training companies. Data collection took place at the beginning (1st year) and at the end (4th year) of the training programme, in order to observe change over time and to describe how apprentices engaged in learning at various steps of their learning trajectory. With the consent of participants, observations were video recorded by the researcher. The complete data set comprises 150 hours of audio-video recordings collected in one vocational school, two training centres and seven different training companies. These recordings document sequences of ordinary training and work activities in which apprentices interact with a variety of experts, ranging from vocational teachers, dedicated trainers or experienced co-workers. Field notes, written documents and research interviews were also used in order to bring complementary elements to the set of observational data.

#### **4 Joining the workplace: A case study**

In what follows, a case study based on audio-video recordings of an apprentice in the automation trade in one particular training company provides an illustration for the specific methodological approach adopted in the research programme.

The case study relates to one of the apprentices fictionally named Rodney (ROD) we followed at various times and in different training sites during his apprenticeship programme. ROD commenced as an automation apprentice in September 2005. At that time, he was already 18 years old. ROD exemplifies a typical profile of the population that enrolls in 'dual' apprenticeship programmes in Geneva and can be seen as representative of a substantial part of the cohort of apprentices observed during the study.

ROD had emigrated from Cape Verde to Switzerland when he was a young boy. His native language was Portuguese and not French. ROD had encountered significant difficulties during his schooling and ended his compulsory education with poor achievements in both literacy and numeracy. The company that hired ROD as an apprentice was a small business that specialized in the construction of electric boards for the building industry. Within the company, ROD was under the supervision of Fernando (FER), his vocational trainer. As is usually the case in companies, Fernando was not dedicated exclusively to the instruction of apprentices. He was also manager of one of the workshops and contributed to productive work tasks. Other colleagues were also working in the same environment as ROD, but they had no official training responsibility for apprentices. As observed in most companies hiring apprentices in technical trades, the training model followed by this company was strongly oriented to productive concerns and considered that apprentices

should learn by being assigned productive tasks from the very beginning of their apprenticeship programme. This means that ROD was immediately put to work and had not been given any period of observation during which he could become familiar with the context of production.

These conditions did not fit ROD's needs for more guided training. After the end of his second year apprenticeship, in June 2007, the company decided to end ROD's contract when he failed at his intermediary exams. His trainer considered that ROD was not motivated enough and required too much assistance to be a helpful resource for the team. As an alternative, ROD could continue his apprenticeship through a full-time school programme in the same trade. These conditions seemed to be more suitable and enabled ROD to succeed in his intermediary exams in June 2008.

Considering this trajectory and the rather problematic kind of transition experienced by ROD when engaging in his apprenticeship programme, it is of particular interest to understand what challenged ROD's integration into professional life when he entered the workplace at the beginning of his training period and in what respect were these difficulties related to language use and participation in interaction. In what follows, these issues will be addressed by analysing three sequences of data collected during the first month of ROD's training period within this company. The excerpts of data transcribed and analysed below refer to various tasks conducted by the apprentice when assembling one of his first electric boards. They illustrate how difficult it was for ROD at that time to make reference to the material environment (Section 4.1), to understand jokes and humour in the workplace (Section 4.2), and finally to reshape participation when guidance was needed (Section 4.3). These categories do not provide an exhaustive typology of challenges associated with workplace learning, but they have also been observed in a wide range of other training practices available in our data (Filliettaz *et al.* 2008).

#### 4.1 Sharing reference

One of the issues apprentices are often faced with when joining the workplace concerns reference to technical concepts. When engaging in material environments they are not familiar with, apprentices sometimes lack resources that enable them to refer adequately to objects or tools belonging to the work context. This is because they often do not know how to name things. But more substantially, this is also because the conceptual, procedural and dispositional knowledge underlying workplace practices are at an early stage of elaboration. These issues may cause local infelicities in interactions with expert workers, particularly when participants fail to identify discrepancies in the ways they establish reference in discourse. In such circumstances, the sharing of reference engages substantial interactional work.

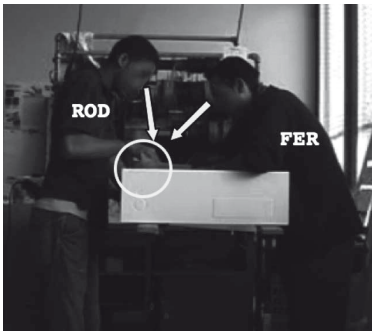


One illustration of the complex interactional work oriented towards a shared understanding of the material environment is the focus of analysis in the following excerpt. At this particular stage, ROD had finished connecting the various electric modules included in his electric board and asked FER to check if everything was correct before moving towards further steps of the mounting procedure. When scrutinizing the interior of the electric board, the trainer immediately observed that ROD forgot to install the ‘earth terminal’. This may have had dangerous consequences for the users of the electric board and requires the installation of specific brass clips. In what follows, we illustrate the difficulties encountered by ROD in establishing reference with the object termed ‘earth terminal’ in this context and comment on the various strategies mobilized by the trainer to guide ROD towards a shared understanding of this concept. The transcript below includes both the French original talk and an English translation.

(1) *this is the earth* (226, 17'00 – 18'40)

- 1 ROD: je vais chercher un comme ça/ . un millimètre/  
**should I go and fetch one of these? one millimetre? [#1] ((points to a terminal in one of the units))**
- 2 FER: *quoi*/ . de quoi\  
**what? what?**
- 3 ROD: une borne pour la terre\  
**an earth terminal**
- 4 FER: non mais attends tu rigoles\  
**wait a minute are you kidding! ((looks at the installation plan))**
- 5 tu vois ici\  
**you see here «four brass clips for seven-pole connection» ((reads the installation plan)) [#2]**
- 6 ça c'est la terre\  
**this is the earth**
- 7 ROD: quatre barrettes/  
**four clips?**
- 8 FER: ouais\  
**yep**
- 9 t'as pas vu dans le tableau hier que je t'ai fait démonter/ . là-bas/ la démo/  
la terre comment c'était fait/  
**didn't you see in the board I asked you to dismantle yesterday over there at the demo the earth connection how it was installed? ((points with his pen in the direction of the hall)) [#3]**
- 10 ROD: ça j'ai pas remarqué la terre\  
**I didn't notice the earth ((starts to move away))**
- 11 FER: VA voir\  
**go and have a look**
- 12 ROD: OK\

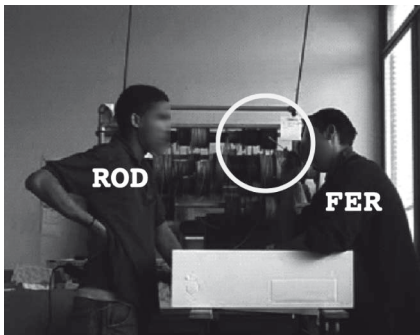
- OK ((continues to move in the direction of the entrance hall))**
- 13 FER: tu enlèves le plastron de nouveau\  
**you remove the cover again**
- 14 ROD: OK\  
**OK**
- 15 **((leaves the workshop and reaches the entrance hall, opens an electric board displayed as a demo))**
- [...]
- 21 ROD: ah ouais c'est ça:/  
**oh yes that's it ((touches the brass clip)) [#4]**
- 22 **((closes the electric board and comes back into the workshop))**
- 23 ROD: c'est bon j'ai vu/  
**it's OK I have seen it**
- 24 FER: t'as vu/  
**did you see?**



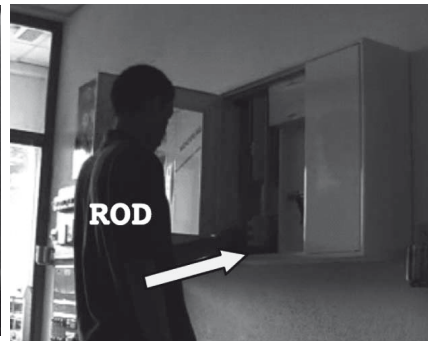
**Figure 1:** ROD points to the earth terminal of one of the units



**Figure 2:** FER reads the installation plan



**Figure 3:** FER points with his pen in the direction of the entrance hall



**Figure 4:** ROD opens the demo board and touches the earth terminal

At the beginning of excerpt (1), ROD addresses his trainer explicitly and asks him if he should install one of the terminals he is pointing to ('should I go and fetch one of these?' l. 1). In doing so, he attempts to assign reference to the linguistic expression 'earth terminal' used by FER previously. Interestingly, the construction of this referential relation does not rely exclusively on linguistic units. ROD also explores the potentialities afforded by the material environment and orients FER's attention towards an existing component of the electric board, displaying a specific body orientation and a pointing gesture co-occurring with the indexical expression 'one of these' (see Figure 1).

This attempt to understand what an earth terminal looks like turns out to be unsuccessful. In fact, ROD displays confusion between two sorts of 'earth terminals' included in such electric boards. He points to the earth terminal of one of the electric units included in the board and not to the sort of clip by which the board should be connected itself to the earth. ROD's incorrect interpretation is progressively made visible by the trainer, but the nature of the confusion remains highly implicit. After asking for a clarification ('what? what?' l. 2) and receiving a confirmation of ROD's interpretation ('an earth terminal' l. 3), FER provides an aggressive and sarcastic response to ROD's proposal ('wait a minute are you kidding!' l. 4). At this stage, the participants do not yet share a common understanding of what the expression 'earth terminal' refers to.

In what follows, FER develops various strategies guiding the apprentice towards a correct identification of the missing part of the board. These strategies explore multiple semiotic resources and unfold sequentially as ROD recurrently fails to understand what an 'earth terminal' refers to. A first strategy displayed by the trainer consists in providing an extended technical linguistic description of the missing part of the board. This description is performed by orienting the participants' attention towards the installation plan (see Figure 2) and reading the instructions referring to the 'earth terminal': 'four brass clips for seven-pole connection' (l. 5); 'this is the earth' (l. 6). Nevertheless, as indicated by ROD's interrogative rephrasing ('four clips?' l. 7), such a technical definition does not seem to contribute to shared understanding. FER then recalls on past experience and mentions a task recently conducted by ROD. Using an indexical gesture pointing to the entrance hall (see Figure 3), he refers back to this task with the expectation that ROD had noticed the existence of the brass clips ('didn't you see in the board I asked you to dismantle yesterday over there at the demo the earth connection how it was installed?' l. 9). But again, this attempt turns out to be ineffective, ROD being unable to remember having seen such earth terminals, as indicated by his answer ('I didn't notice the earth' l. 10). Finally, FER asks ROD to go back to the entrance hall ('go and have a look' l. 11), to open the demo board again ('you remove the cover again'

l. 13) and to find out what sorts of clips are used to connect these boards to the earth. ROD steps out of the workshop, opens the demo board on display, and scrutinizes its internal composition (l. 15). It is only when establishing visual contact and touching the brass clips (see Figure 4) that he is finally able to identify the sort of device referred to as the 'earth terminal'. He provides a self-addressed account of this understanding ('oh yes that's it' l. 21) before closing the board, returning back to the workshop and confirming to his trainer that he could see how the earth terminal was installed ('it's OK I have seen it' l. 23).

This first excerpt illustrates how difficult it is for ROD to orient himself in an unfamiliar work context, particularly when the objects that experts are referring to are not immediately visible in the material environment. In such contexts, shared understanding relies on a dynamic, multimodal and highly guided interactional construction. This construction is dynamic because the establishment of reference with the concept of 'earth terminal' unfolds sequentially and relies on multiple linguistic resources used successively by participants: 'one of these' (l. 1), 'earth terminal' (l. 3), 'brass clips for seven-pole connection' (l. 5), 'the earth' (l. 6), 'the earth connection' (l. 9), 'it' (ll. 21, 23). It is multimodal in the sense that these linguistic forms are combined with a wide range of other semiotic resources, such as gaze, body orientation, and pointing or touching gestures. And finally, this multimodal and dynamic meaning-making process appears as highly guided in the sense that participants endorse distinct roles and participate in different ways to the ongoing interaction. It is FER who initiates the various strategies that orient ROD towards the establishment of reference and it is FER again who directs ROD's exploration of the material environment ('go and have a look' l. 11, 'you remove the cover again' l. 13).

#### 4.2 Understanding jokes

In the first example analysed above, access to conceptual knowledge appears as a key issue for participation in workplace practices. But these cognitive dimensions of vocational learning are not the only challenges apprentices face when they undergo practical training. Becoming a member of a professional community requires the apprentice to manage the affective and social aspects of workplace interactions, namely to participate adequately in relational work and to engage with specific discourse genres such as small talk or humour. There have been numerous studies devoted to these social dimensions of workplace interactions, conducted for instance in the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) in Wellington (Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Schnurr *et al.* 2007). Data analyses conducted in various professional fields have established that jokes and humour are inherent components of working lives and are proper to the workplace culture of each professional community. These authors have

also shown that participating adequately in such discourse practices is not an easy task for newcomers. Nevertheless, it is a task that may determine the quality of their integration within communities of practice.

Turning back to initial vocational training, it is expected that apprentices decode the specific social norms required by the communities they will progressively belong to. As new members of work teams, they have to learn how to cope with humour, how to interpret jokes and how to respond to them. These social dimensions of workplace practices are far from easy to cope with and bring new challenges to the transition process.

In what follows, we give an illustration of this by observing how ROD faced difficulties in sharing jokes with his colleagues. In the second transcript below, ROD had to use specific software in the computer room in order to edit and engrave plastic tags that had to be attached to the front of his electric board. ROD encountered problems in running the software and had to ask one of his colleagues, JUL, for assistance.

(2) *Justin Bridou (227, 04'15 – 06'56)*

- 1 ROD: **((enters commands on the computer))**
- 2 un/ deux/ trois\ .. OK\  
**one two three OK ((enters commands on the computer)) [#5]**
- 3 ROD: **((goes back to the workshop)) [#6]**
- 4 ROD: il a un problème l'ordi hein\ ..  
**the computer has a problem**
- 5 j'ai fait tout le: tout le pro- processus et puis ça marche pas\  
**I went through all the procedure but it doesn't work**
- 6 JUL: **((JUL leaves his workspace and joins ROD in the computer room)) [#7]**
- 7 **((JUL and ROD stand in front of the computer)) [#8]**
- 8 ROD: il me marque ça\  
**it says this**
- 9 JUL: **((handles the mouse and inserts commands))**
- 10 t'as été là/  
**did you go here? ((inserts commands))**
- 11 ROD: ouais\  
**yep**
- 12 JUL: **((inserts commands))**
- 13 ROD: ah non moins moins moins/  
**no no less less less**
- 14 JUL: attends mais/  
**wait a minute**
- 15 ROD: non c'est: juste un/ .. c'est juste un/  
**no it's just one it's just one**
- 16 JUL: juste un/ [Justin]  
**just one? [Justin]**

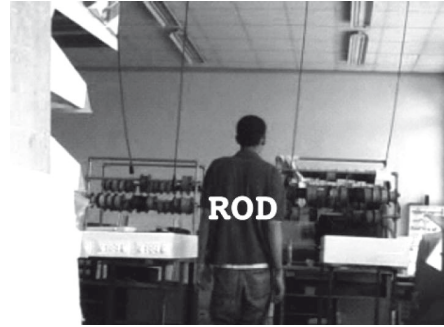
- 17 ROD: ouais\  
**yep**
- 18 JUL: Bridou/  
**Bridou?**
- 19 ROD: il faut effacer là\ il faut  
**you have to delete that**
- 20 JUL: Justin Bridou/ ou:  
**Justin Bridou? or**
- 21 ROD: juste un plan\ . c'est juste là ça cette ligne\  
**just a layer you have to set it with one layer**  
**((points to the screen))**
- 22 JUL: pas Bridou\  
**not Bridou?**
- 23 ROD: c'est quoi Bridou\  
**what is Bridou?**
- 24 JUL: un saucisson\  
**a sausage ((continues to enter commands))**
- 25 c'est ça deux trois quatre cinq/  
**two three four five that's it?**
- 26 ROD: ouais\  
**yep**
- 27 JUL: deux trois quatre cinq\ OK\ .. maintenant\ . ça c'est bon/  
**OK two three four five OK now that' all right**
- 28 t'as mis en vertical/  
**did you set it vertically?**  
**((the printer starts to engrave the stickers))**

At the beginning of this sequence of work, ROD is engaging in an individual form of action in the computer room (Figure 5). He enters commands on the computer and counts the number of positions he has to include in the sticker he is about to print (l. 1). But then he has difficulties with the computer, and he is unable to complete the editing procedure on his own. He leaves the computer room, walks back to the workshop (see Figure 6) and asks his colleagues for assistance ('the computer has a problem' l. 4; 'I went through all the procedure but it doesn't work' l. 5). FER, his official trainer, is not available at that moment. It is then JUL, a colleague sharing the same workspace, who immediately responds to ROD's request and joins him in the computer room (see Figure 7).

Once JUL and ROD face the computer, a sequence of so-called close guidance (Billett 2001) commences, in which JUL very quickly takes control of the task. It is JUL who stands in front of the computer and who handles the mouse (see Figure 8). It is JUL again who inserts commands into the computer (l. 9, 10, 12), questioning the apprentice about the kind of procedure he has



**Figure 5:** ROD enters commands on the computer



**Figure 6:** ROD goes back to the workshop



**Figure 7:** JUL leaves his workspace and joins ROD in the computer room



**Figure 8:** JUL and ROD stand in front of the computer

conducted so far ('did you go here?' l. 10). Interestingly, ROD busily tries to keep an active role in the editing process, for instance by giving instructions to JUL: 'no no less less' (l. 13), 'no it's just one its just one' (l. 15). But JUL begins to tease the apprentice by making jokes about his talk. The conditions in which this joke is progressively produced by JUL and misunderstood by ROD deserve particular attention.

In line 16, JUL echoes the terms used in ROD's instruction ('just one'), but actually plays with words and refers to the French name 'Justin'. ROD does not identify this turn as a joke and answers literally by saying 'yep' (l. 17) to what he interprets as a request for confirmation. JUL then elaborates on the joke by coupling the first name 'Justin' with the surname 'Bridou' (l. 18). The association of Justin with Bridou is very familiar to everyone sharing a French cultural background. It refers to a popular trademark producing sausages in France and which acquired a high level of visibility in television media in the 1980s, when numerous TV spots were advertising for 'Le bâton de Berger ...

de Justin Bridou'. But ROD obviously does not share this cultural background and hence still cannot interpret JUL's contributions as humorous. Again, he answers literally to what he understands as a question, and produces an explicit form of instruction ('you have to delete that' l. 19). This time, JUL associates the names 'Justin' and 'Bridou' in sequential order so as to make the reference to 'Justin Bridou' more clear (l. 20), but the same misunderstanding goes on and ROD still fails to identify the joke ('just a layer you have to set it with one layer' l. 21). It is only after JUL's fifth mention of Justin Bridou ('not Bridou?' l. 22) that ROD asks for clarification ('what is Bridou?' l. 23) and that the misunderstanding is made explicit. The reference to the sausage trademark is then revealed by JUL ('a sausage' l. 24), but its humorous meaning in the context fails to be shared. Participants then move back to the task and complete the engraving procedure.

What is particularly striking in this example is that in spite of a growing number of contextual cues, ROD is not in a position to understand the non-literal meaning associated with JUL's talk. Coming from a distinct cultural environment, he does not share the same knowledge JUL is familiar with and cannot associate 'Justin Bridou' either with a 'sausage' or with a joke. Consequently, he does not even notice that he is being teased by JUL and that his misunderstanding reinforces the teasing. As mentioned by Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 170), 'being teased and made the butt of jokes is normal workplace experience for all workers'. It is also through these discourse practices that membership in communities of practice is established. But these jokes also challenge newcomers who have to learn to recognize when a remark is intended as humorous or sarcastic. The fact that ROD fails to recognize JUL's talk as humorous and sarcastic places him outside the professional community he is supposed to become a member of. Hence, a rather complex marginalization process seems to go on here, in which ROD fails to participate adequately in the interaction both on a transactional level and on a social one. On a transactional level, ROD clearly loses control over the task and becomes a mere observer of the engraving procedure carried out by JUL. And on a social level, he fails to understand the non-literal nature of JUL's talk and does not respond as expected to the joke.

### 4.3 Reframing participation

As shown in the preceding excerpts, a substantial part of practical training taking place in the workplace is deeply shaped by productive tasks. It is when facing difficulties in their own work that apprentices require guidance and that expertise may be shared with them. But requesting such guidance is certainly not an easy task. It requires a reconfiguration of the participation framework and a reframing of the local context, to put it in Goffmanian terms



(Goffman 1974). Trainers or expert workers often have to interrupt their own productive tasks in order to endorse specific training roles towards apprentices. As shown in excerpt (2), experienced workers may immediately satisfy these help requests, but in some other contexts, they may display unwillingness to engage with apprentices. In such contexts, the conditions in which assistance is requested and participation reframed often expose apprentices to face-threatening situations and may even lead to interpersonal conflict. Hence managing such help-request sequences and reframing participation can be seen as another type of challenge met by apprentices when they engage with co-workers in their early days of work.

Excerpt (3) takes place a couple of minutes after excerpt (2). After JUL has left the computer room, ROD tries to complete the editing procedure on his own. But again, he faces the same kind of problem and is unable to proceed with the software used for engraving the stickers. He then goes back to the workshop, where his trainer is engaged in a discussion with JUL.

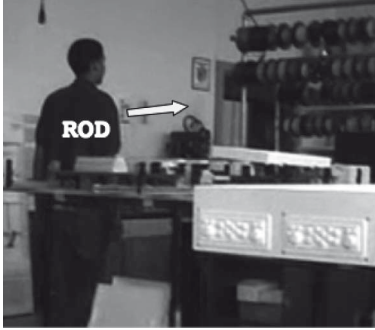
(3) *I have a problem it doesn't work (227, 11'20 – 12'30)*

- 1 ROD: **((ROD leaves the computer room and goes to the workshop))** [#9]
- 2 ROD > FER: j'ai un problème/. il marche pas\  
**I have a problem it doesn't work**
- 3 FER > ROD: ah c'est sûr que ça marche pas hein\ . ça peut que fonctionner hein\  
**of course it doesn't 'walk' it can only function!**
- 4 FER > JUL: vas-y JUL j'en peux plus\  
**you go JUL I've had enough**
- 5 JUL > ROD: c'est quoi l'problème\ . ENcore\  
**what's the problem now?**
- 6 ROD > JUL: ça c'est des T-shirts/  
**are those the T-shirts?**
- 7 JUL: ouais c'est des T-shirts\  
**yes these are the T-shirts ((comes with ROD in the computer room))**  
[#10]
- 8 JUL: et TOI le problème c'est quoi/  
**and what's your problem then?**
- 9 ROD: ça marche pas\  
**it doesn't work!**
- 10 JUL: c'est QUOI le PROblème/ . qu'est-ce qui marche pas: qu'est ce qui-  
**what's the problem? what doesn't work what's-**
- 11 ROD: je sais pas il me marque CA là\ chaque fois\  
**I don't know it says this all the time**  
**((ROD and JUL stand in front of the screen))** [#11]
- 12 JUL: mais-  
**but ((starts typing on the keyboard))**
- 14 c'est comme tout à l'heure/ . t'as des plans en trop\ . faut les supprimer\  
voilà/

- it's like last time you have too many layers you have to delete them  
you see**
- 15 ROD: ah ça j'oublie tout le temps\
- oh I always forget that**
- 16 JUL: mais: oui ouais je sais/ euh parce que ça fait déjà deux fois que je viens  
ici/
- yes oh yes I know er because this is the second time I've had to come  
here**
- 17 et pourquoi t'as pas fait tout à la suite\
- and why didn't you do it all at the same time?**
- 18 ROD: parce que là/ ça y a des EFI/ pis je sais pas comment faire\
- because there are some EFI breakers here and I don't know how to  
deal with that**
- 19 JUL: ouais mais 8 – 9 – 10 là c'est quoi\
- right but 8 – 9– 10 what's that?**
- 20 ROD: 8 – 9 – 10 c'est: c'est avant:: . c'est avant les EFI\
- 8 – 9 – 10 come before the EFI breakers**
- 21 JUL: ouais je t'expliquerai/ . comment programmer ça une autre fois là\
- right I'll explain how to program this another time  
(leaves the computer room)**

As in excerpt (2), this sequence of interaction starts with a help request initiated by the apprentice. Unable to complete the editing procedure on his own, ROD has to reshape the participation frame from an individual action to a joint action. He does so by moving from the computer room to the workshop (see Figure 9) and by initiating a verbal exchange with his trainer: 'I have a problem it doesn't work' (l. 2). The linguistic form associated with this request deserves particular attention. ROD uses numerous attenuation devices when asking for assistance. The production of his request is linguistically presented as an assertion ('I have a problem') and remains highly implicit. And the encountered problem is described as being caused by the computer ('it doesn't work') and not by its user. ROD therefore takes numerous precautions in order to perform what seems to be anticipated as a highly face-threatening speech act.

The type of reaction displayed by the trainer in response to this implicit request confirms the face-threatening potential associated with ROD's speech act. In a first turn, FER replies with anger to ROD's request, reminding him that he is using inappropriate vocabulary for describing the problem: The computer cannot 'work' (literally 'walk' considering the polysemy of the French verb *marcher*); it can only 'function.' In responding in that way, FER criticizes ROD for not being technical enough and for his lack of linguistic capital. In a second turn, FER initiates a new exchange addressed to his colleague JUL and asks him to respond to the apprentice ('you go JUL I've had enough', l. 4). These aggressive and face-threatening responses are not only provided by the official



**Figure 9:** ROD goes back to the workshop



**Figure 10:** JUL comes with ROD to the computer room



**Figure 11:** JUL joins ROD in the computer room

trainer. They are also evident in JUL's attitude towards ROD, as attested by his recurrent inquiries about the nature of the encountered problem ('what's the problem now?', l. 5; 'and what's your problem then?', l. 8; 'what's the problem? what doesn't work?' l. 10)

When ROD and JUL finally congregate in the computer room, the material environment provides assistance to ROD's explanation of the problem ('I don't know it says this all the time', l. 11). But here again, it is JUL who immediately takes control of the computer (l. 13) and carries out the editing procedure (see Figure 11). He draws ROD's attention to the fact that he is facing the same problem as before ('it's like last time you have too many layers you have to delete them you see', l. 14) and that it is the second time he has to come over here to fix the same problem ('yes oh yes I know er because this is the second time I've had to come here', l. 16). JUL then continues to question the apprentice about the strange way in which he numbers the tags ('and why didn't you do it all at the same time?', l. 17; 'right but 8-9-10 what's that?' l. 19). Obviously upset by ROD's answers ('I don't know how to deal with that', l. 18), JUL leaves the computer room without giving any more information and postponing

additional explanation to an unclear future: ‘right I’ll explain how to program this another time’ (l. 21).

This third excerpt illustrates the complex conditions in which expert workers are expected to endorse training roles while carrying out productive tasks. It also illustrates the contradictions faced by apprentices regarding practical training in the workplace. On the one hand, they are being put to work with the instruction to ‘ask for assistance’ if they encounter difficulties but, on the other hand, the conditions in which questions and help-requests reframe participation are often contested by experts and may endanger the apprentices’ face as well as their legitimacy to take part in workplace practices. In ROD’s case, as shown above, increasingly negative feedback was provided by his colleagues, which took the form of sarcasm and blame. These negative responses to ROD’s requests had a direct impact on the work climate and engaged a rapid marginalization process in which the apprentice was progressively excluded from the community of workers hired by the company. This became apparent when employers of the company did not engage in small talk with the apprentice or when they progressively did not propose to give him a lift after work.

## 5 From research results to practical outcomes

Elaborating on ROD’s experience, it becomes apparent that social and relational issues play a major role in vocational training interactions. As shown in the data, trainers and experienced workers shape the ways apprentices take part in productive tasks; they configure their perceptions of the material environment; they make jokes and provide negative evaluations as responses to their requests for assistance. On the one hand, these actions can be regarded as rather benign realities, consistent with workplace cultures and inherent to professional lives. But on the other hand, these practices may also lead to marginalization, if not to stigmatization. In ROD’s case, these ingredients progressively contributed to his exclusion from the local community of practice, which finally resulted in his dismissal from the company.

These elements of the case study are of course very local and highly contextualized. Much more data should be taken into consideration to understand *why* and most importantly *how* ROD’s immersion into the work context failed and led to a reorientation of his training trajectory (Filliettaz *et al.* 2008). Nevertheless, these empirical results illustrate how difficult it may be for school leavers to face the realities of workplace practices. The case study focused more particularly on three sorts of challenges met by apprentices when joining the workplace: the difficulty of referring to the technical material environment; the opacity of humour based on specific cultural knowledge; and the face-threatening nature of help-request sequences. As already mentioned, these challenges are but limited

examples within a wider range of factors that may affect transitions into working lives. But these examples illuminate the complex cognitive and social processes associated with initial vocational training. They remind us that becoming a professional is not only a matter of knowledge acquisition and conceptual learning but relies very much on relational work and identity issues. These cognitive and social processes, as seen in the case study, are not constructed independently from language use. Rather, they are deeply shaped by discourse and by the complex range of semiotic means used by participants when engaging in interaction. It is by conducting interaction with experienced workers, by negotiating meaning with these experts, by reshaping participation in the workplace, etc. that apprentices learn to take part in productive tasks and become members of professional communities. From that standpoint, language-in-interaction should be regarded as an important ingredient through which learning occurs and by means of which apprentices are 'doing' transitions from school to work.

This observation requires a renewed approach to language in vocational education, an approach in which language is not narrowly regarded as a disciplinary 'content' of teaching and learning, but also as a lens through which critical reflection about training practices and efficiency in vocational education can be carried out. Linguistic tools and categories developed in the field of discourse and interaction analysis provide a consistent basis for such a perspective. As illustrated above, they bring useful insights for revealing the complex and often implicit means by which power relations are being established and reproduced in ordinary professional practices and for describing how discourse and interaction contribute to the construction of these power relations. From that standpoint, the perspective proposed in this paper sheds light on the specific training conditions that may lead to attrition of apprenticeship and also contributes to a better understanding of the social processes underlying problematic transitions from school to work.

As linguists interested in vocational education, it is important to link our research results with practical outcomes. One particularly promising avenue currently being explored by our team is to use the empirical material collected during our research in the context of training programmes addressed to vocational trainers. As shown by the case study, vocational trainers in the workplace play a crucial role in the transition process experienced by apprentices. In consonance with some previous work conducted in the field of workplace learning (Billett 2001), research results presented here show an urgent need to increase the level of pedagogical qualification of trainers in the workplace to enhance the overall quality of the guidance provided in training companies. Applying a discursive and interactional lens to empirical data certainly does not solve the complex issue of problematic transitions in apprenticeship programmes. However, it can make visible the sorts of difficulties faced by

apprentices when joining the workplace and it can also help trainers and experienced workers to become more reflexive about their role in assisting these apprentices to accomplish consistent transitions into working lives.

## About the author

Laurent Filliettaz received his PhD in linguistics from The University of Geneva and is currently associate professor at the department of adult and vocational education at The University of Geneva. His research interests include praxeological approaches to discourse, language use in institutional settings and vocational training interactions. He has published several books, chapters and papers both in French and English, and promoting applied linguistic methods in the field of vocational education and training research. Address for correspondence: Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, The University of Geneva, CH-1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland. Email: Laurent.Filliettaz@unige.ch

## References

- Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (ed.) (2009) *The Handbook of Business Discourse*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Billett, S. (2001) *Learning in the Workplace: Strategies for Effective Practice*. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Candlin, C. N. (ed.) (2002) *Research and Practice in Professional Discourse*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.
- Collin, K. and Valleala U. M. (2005) Interaction among employees: how does learning take place in the social communities of the workplace and how might such learning be supervised? *Journal of Education and Work* 18 (4): 401-420. doi:10.1080/13639080500327873
- Dubs, R. (2006) *An Appraisal of the Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*. Bern: HEP Verlag.
- Erickson, F. (2004) *Talk and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge Polity Press.
- Filliettaz, de Saint-Georges, I. and Duc, B. (2008) 'Vos mains sont intelligentes!': *Interactions en formation professionnelle initiale*. Université de Genève: Cahiers de la Section des Sciences de l'Éducation, 117.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Gonon, Ph. (2005) Challenges in the Swiss vocational education and training system. bwp@, 7.

- Goodwin, C. (2000) Action and embodiment within situated human interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (10): 1489-1522. doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(99)00096-X
- Gumperz, J. (1982) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511611834
- Holmes, J. and Stubbe, M. (2003) *Power and Politeness in the Workplace*. London: Longman
- Kress, G., Charalampous, T., Ogborn, J. and Jewitt, C. (2001) *Multimodal Teaching and Learning: The Rhetorics of the Science Classroom*. London: Continuum.
- Lamamra, N. and Masdonati, J. (2009) *Arrêter une formation professionnelle: Mots et maux d'apprenti-e-s*. Lausanne: Antipodes.
- Lave, J. (1988) *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics, and Culture in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511609268
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine, Ph. and Scollon, R. (eds) (2004) *Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Mondada, L. (2006) Interactions en situations professionnelles et institutionnelles: De l'analyse détaillée aux retombées pratiques. *Revue française de linguistique appliquée* XI (2): 5-16.
- Norris, S. (2004) *Analyzing Multimodal Interaction: A Methodological Framework*. London: Routledge.
- Rex, L., Steadman, S. C. and Graciano, M. K. (2006) Researching the complexity of classroom interaction. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli and P. B. Elmore (eds) *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, 727-771. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. and Jefferson, G. (1978) A simplest systematics of the organization of turn taking for conversation. In J. Schenkein (ed.) *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, 7-55. New York: Academic Press.
- Sarangi, S. and Candlin, C. (eds.) (2003) Introduction: Trading between reflexivity and relevance: new challenges for applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 24 (3): 271-285. doi:10.1093/applin/24.3.271
- Sarangi, S. and Roberts, C. (eds) (1999) *Talk, Work and Institutional Order. Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schnurr, S., Marra, M. and Holmes, J. (2007) Being (im)polite in New Zealand workplaces: Māori and Pākehā leaders. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39 (4): 712-729. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2006.11.016
- Stalder, B. E. and Nägele, C. (2011) Vocational education and training in Switzerland: Organisation, development and challenges for the future. In M. M. Bergman, S. Hupka-Brunner, A. Keller, T. Meyer and B. E. Stalder (eds) *Youth Transitions in Switzerland: Results from the TREE Panel Study*, 18-39. Zürich: Seismo.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Appendix: Transcription conventions

Prosodic information is given for the original French transcript

CAP	accented segments
/	raising intonation
\	falling intonation
XX	uninterpretable segments
(hesitation)	uncertain sequence of transcription
:	lengthened syllable
.	pause lasting less than one second
..	pause lasting between one and two seconds
>	addressor-addressee relation (ROD > FER)
??	unidentifiable speaker
<u>Underlined</u>	overlapping talk
(( <i>comments</i> ))	comments regarding non verbal behaviour
[#1]	reference to the numbered illustration in the transcript