Research Article

"I Can't Apply Without Thinking!" Helping Migrants Develop Their Perceived Employability Through Self-Appraisal in an Online Job Search

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Abstract

This paper explores the literacy experiences of migrant job seekers in the United Kingdom, looking online for work, adding to other studies on the topic. Using ethnographic methods, video data, images and field notes were gathered on visits to three research sites to observe job seekers and helpers of varied ages and educational and linguistic backgrounds. Data were analyzed using activity theory, to explore how participants' perceived employability was affected by online mediation during job searches. Extracts from three case studies show how impromptu discussions led to enriched understandings of the social world of work, vital for employability. The paper contributes specific digital employability literacies for a syllabus that includes low literate job seekers and recommends in-person or online mentoring for adult migrant job seekers, to provide personalized orientation to work or training, currently ill-afforded by much digital public employment support.

Keywords: migrants, perceived employability, literacies, online job applications

This paper examines the experiences of three migrants in the United Kingdom, with English as an additional language (EAL), and their helpers, as they look online for work. The literacies of online job seeking remain widely under-researched, and potentially underappreciated. Increasingly, public employment services (PES) interventions are driven by technological change. Increasing reliance on digital employment support, punitive welfare sanctions and a reduction of in-person encounters with PES staff, reduces job seekers' opportunities to adapt and learn. This is especially true for migrants unfamiliar with host country employment marketplaces and selling themselves to specific job sectors. This paper examines unfolding online job searches, to answer the research question: what discourses and literacies shape the development of perceived employability?

It begins with the concept of employability, followed by an overview of public employment support for migrants, since the move to digital and a section on job-seeking texts. These lead into a summary of the theoretical frameworks and methodology. Findings from the three case studies are presented and the pedagogical implications for adult literacies within PES are discussed. Finally, the paper recommends how support for the development of perceived employability could be established, to complement existing online PES.

The Concept of Employability

Employability can be seen as an interactive framework in dialogue with the socioeconomic context, with responsibility shared between individual, potential employers and policy makers (e.g., Fugate et al., 2021;

Green, 2017). The individual's evaluation of their own employability in relation to the job market has produced the narrower concept of "perceived employability" (e.g., Berglund & Wallinder, 2015; Farashah et al., 2023). It is the development of migrants' perceived employability, in interaction with the broader environment, with which this paper is concerned.

Green's (2017) interactive employability framework considers individual and environmental factors and was based on a scoping review of U.S. and European academic and policy documents on digital technologies and employability. In the framework, individual factors and circumstances, such as qualifications and transport interact with external factors, such as recruitment practices, transport links; and macroeconomic factors such as welfare regimes. Furthermore, it shows that to develop perceived employability, the job seeker must understand the broader employment environment, and this implies literacy demands.

Access to Public Employment Support

As elsewhere, anti-immigration sentiment and policies in the United Kingdom (e.g., McKinney, 2024; Taylor, 2018) discourage support for migrants (Craig, 2007; Dwyer et al., 2019), when support for existing populations is often rationed. The UK Welfare Act (2012) introduced benefits conditionality alongside "technological compulsion" (Clayton & Macdonald, 2013; Green, 2017) for job seekers by mandating them to apply online and introducing weekly job application targets and benefits sanctions. Simultaneously, austerity measures halved employment support and adult education funding (Bolton & Foster, 2018; Foster, 2019). In the United Kingdom since 2012, self-funding charity work clubs have provided computer access and help with applications to meet online job-seeking targets. Although welcome social spaces, they are too poorly resourced to be effective at moving migrants into work (Calò et al., 2021; Willott & Stevenson, 2013), especially those who need help with literacy, language or IT (Crisp, 2015).

Green (2017, p. 1649) described the rescaling effect these U.K. policy changes as a "negative vortex," where employers are overwhelmed by the volume of applications; job seekers spend less time on applications but submit many more than

before; employers withdraw from the online PES systems; and ultimately, the number of vacancies on PES systems shrinks. Additionally, online recruitment tends to privilege the already advantaged, and entrench inequalities (Clayton & Macdonald, 2013; Rieucau, 2015), but despite these criticisms, similar online PES policies have been introduced elsewhere, ostensibly to eliminate unfairness and promote efficiency in resource allocation (Casey, 2022; Kobrin, 2024; Scott et al., 2022; Smythe et al., 2021).

Online PES seems to focus little on delivering employability support. In Australia, it also appears to emphasize individual accountability for welfare compliance, through self-reporting (Casey, 2022), rather than developing employability. Despite an enhanced service for people with multiple barriers, Casey (2022) highlights how digital self-reporting disadvantages vulnerable groups, grappling with self-reporting on the government digital dashboard.

Scott et al. (2022) studied migrant job seekers' experiences of online PES in Germany, where digital PES profiling tools were mainly used as predictors to allocate resources rather than provide information and guidance, which both job seekers and PES advisors would have preferred. Unsurprisingly, job seekers wanted to be treated "like humans" as did migrants in a wider European study (Fritz & Donat, 2017). They strongly preferred in-person contact, for easier communication, and wanted genuine personalized orientation to the job market. Similar preferences for in-person meetings were found in earlier U.K. studies into migrant and/or disadvantaged job seekers (Cheesbrough et al., 2018; Green et al., 2011; Marangozov, 2014).

The social aspects of employability frameworks are vital components, and the development of bridging capital, wider networks of more casual acquaintances, to access work, was identified by Canduela et al. (2015) as a worthwhile policy focus. Several studies (Giulietti et al., 2013; Green et al., 2011) show many migrants rely on close social networks to find work, which can also, depending on their composition, limit opportunities.

Social networks, especially insiders acting as knowledge brokers, were also highlighted by Wheeler and Dillahunt (2018). They examined how digital and social resources influenced the job searches of low-resourced job seekers

in the United States. Their framework of the job search process starts with learning about the job market; then researching and self-evaluation in relation to vacancies; next, applying and preparing for interview; and finally, using connections for specific information or support that helped secure work (Wheeler & Dillahunt, 2018).

This aligns with Green's (2017) interactive employability framework and indicates how perceived employability can be developed. However, none of these studies addresses how a migrant with EAL would manage this, if the only PES available were digital. This is pertinent to so-called "job ready" highly educated professional migrants, a group whose underemployment arises from a combination of issues, including access to professional networks, and is well recognized (Allan, 2013; Clayton et al., 2016; Thondhlana et al., 2016).

Reading and Writing Recruitment Texts

Recruitment genres vary across cultures and sectors, even within the same domains (Baynham, 1995; Bhatia, 1993), and result from intersecting discourses and practices, such as marketing, equalities legislation, and data protection. Several studies show the literacy demands job seeking makes on migrants. Del Percio (2018) described how migrant job seekers in an Italian PES center were intensively trained to "read" the jobs market and repackage themselves accordingly. Many less educated job seekers lost motivation and withdrew. Benseman's (2014) study of low educated migrant job seekers in New Zealand noted that progress on employability courses was extremely slow and required sustained investment in acquiring alphabetic literacy, language and learning to learn, before actively looking for employment. Bigelow and Watson (2011) describe such literacy demands as crossing an abyss "from traditional orality to codified literacy to the digitacy of technologised culture" (p. 464).

Professionals also find aspects of recruitment texts difficult. Refugee professionals in the United Kingdom frequently struggled with completing forms, and writing CVs, leading in some cases to disillusionment about ever re-entering their professions or other employment (Willott & Stevenson, 2013). Bhatia (1993) highlighted the challenges of producing successful job-seeking genres,

for migrants applying for work in the global north, due to unfamiliarity with writing modest yet self-promotional texts, based on self-appraisal in relation to vacancies. Applications should be tailored to present a credible relevant self, using the CV to document evidence of any claims in the cover letter. He claimed it is the successful portrayal of the "relevant self" that is paramount in job applications and "self-appraisal is its most important feature" (Bhatia, 1993, p.74). Using recruitment texts is therefore demanding, as is self-appraisal. Since the advent of online PES, these genres have become mandatory for all job seekers, not only professionals, usually forming part of a recruitment account set-up.

Online recruitment requires PES advisers and job seekers to constantly upskill and acquire new literacies. For example, Smythe et al. (2021) noted that job seekers need now write for a machine readership, as algorithms screen online resumes for relevant key words and may automatically reject those without. Kobrin (2024) describes the difficulties a mature job seeker with a professional background experienced, managing large volumes of recruitment emails, and critically evaluating frequent demands for personal information. Łącka-Badura (2015) describes online recruitment as a marketplace at "peak interdiscursivity," emphasizing the complexity of hyperlinked texts in recruitment that may add to the frustrations and mistrust experienced by Kobrin's (2024) participant. Dillahunt et al. (2021) mention many less traditional platforms used by successful job seekers, beyond Indeed or LinkedIn, and suggest that low-resourced job seekers could be encouraged to use online platforms more purposely, as well-educated job seekers tend to, for advice, referrals, and training.

Online recruitment makes assumptions about speed, ease, convenience, and fairness (Casey, 2022; Kobrin, 2024; Smythe et al., 2021). However, the above studies clearly demonstrate the complex literacy demands of online recruitment on applicants and helpers, in terms of choices not only about texts, including writing for non-human audiences, but also managing, finding, and trusting information and platforms. As several have argued (Clayton et al., 2016; Fritz & Donat, 2017; Roberts, 2010), language is often learned in the workplace, and is the result of integration, not its cause. The move to online PES and online recruitment more broadly poses additional barriers for migrant job seekers with EAL, as

it may remove access to people from whom specific employability discourses can be acquired while increasing the literacies needed, which may be harder than the work itself. The next section outlines the theoretical frameworks used for this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

New literacy studies (NLS) (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000) conceptualizes literacy as more than decoding and encoding texts; it is about understanding the culturally recognizable ways in which people use literacy (Maybin, 2000) and should be seen as a set of varied and dynamic situated social practices. NLS centers on observations of literacy events, occasions when texts are being used; it focuses on people's goals, thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards texts and acknowledges the role of literacy brokers, knowledgeable and trusted others, who collaborate with people in using literacies to achieve their goals (Papen, 2010).

NLS views texts, including speech, as the semiotisations of social practices, which can thus be inferred through texts (Street, 2001). Texts can therefore index broader discourses, particular patterned and recognizable ways of thinking being and doing (Fairclough, 2003). Knowledge of such broader discourses is implicit in Green's (2017) interactive employability framework, for example discourses around employer recruitment practices. Gee (2011) includes the use of material resources in his definition of discourse, claiming the necessity of being "in synch with various objects, tools, places, technologies and other people" (p. 152) for an individual to participate with "mastery" in a literacy practice. This draws on a multiliteracies conceptualization of literacies, (e.g., Cazden et al., 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), which views literacies as both multi-contextual and multimodal. All of the above foreground the dynamism of literacy practices, driven particularly by technological change and are useful to conceptualize online job seeking literacies.

Material resources are an important part of digitally mediated interaction, which happens simultaneously, across multiple devices and spaces, blurring boundaries between texts and events (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009). Discourse analysis (e.g., Barton & Lee, 2013; Bazerman, 2004; Jones & Hafner, 2021; Shipka, 2011) has previously drawn on activity theory, as it focuses on actions rather than texts, so can include analysis of physical actions such as tapping and swiping a screen, as well as other modes of interaction.

Psychological activity theory (AT) (e.g., Bedny et al., 2000; Leont'ev, 1981) applies the principle of historicity to all mediational means, thus tools are cultural, and link individuals with the social world, past and present. All action is socially situated, mediated by the body or external tools, and motivated by goals, and action is the prime unit of analysis. Mediated actions have semantic, syntagmatic and pragmatic features that, when seen as part of meaning making, constitute practices, much as words constitute sentences (Bedny & Karwowski, 2004, p. 145). Observation of actions renders practices visible. By focusing on the individual, acting in a social environment, AT makes a bridge between the individual and collective activity (Leont'ev, 1981) such as recruitment, job seeking or welfare. It provides a structure to account for an online job application as a goal-focused mediated individual activity, within the social world of job-seeking. It can make visible the variance between individual and collective motivations (Wertsch, 1985) and the affordances and constraints of mediational means (Jones & Hafner, 2021; Shipka, 2011). The following section outlines the study design and analysis.

Methodology

An ethnographic approach was used, aligned with NLS and AT. Participants were recruited using contacts with a local charity work club, and a large, specialized English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) center, which ran a student job club. Participants were a convenience sample, as attendance was uncertain. Using participant observation over a series of visits to research sites, three case studies were conducted (Table 1), with participants of various ages, education and language backgrounds. Video recordings of unfolding job searches, job seeking texts and field notes were collected, followed by semi-scripted interviews. In case studies 1 & 3, the participants were job seekers and their support staff. In case study 2, I became involved, as the participant, a highly qualified professional, was applying from home without PES support.

AT (Leont'ev, 1981) has three interdependent levels of analysis: activity, action and operation, which interact,

shaping events. The data were analyzed in relation to ongoing self-appraisal of perceived employability, using these levels. Resources such as skills, qualifications, and social networks were considered at the level of operations. Macroeconomic factors such as employment policies were considered at the level of activity. Recordings of job applications were transcribed and analyzed as actions, which included talk as a mental action (Bedny et al., 2000). Data for in-depth analysis were selected by reviewing the video data and fieldnotes, looking for moments of uncertainty or hesitation, at the level of action, which signified where unfamiliar practices intersected (Scollon, 2001; Shipka, 2011), and goals and tasks began to be adjusted in relation to resources and circumstances, as participants self-appraised.

The multimodal data were imported into an NVivo project, then linked to the respective video segments. I initially transcribed talk manually in NVivo and coded the videos for actions (Figure 1). Actions are represented as different colored stripes, shown in Figure 1 to Figure 4. These coding stripes graphically illustrated job applications as sequences of lower and higher level actions, constituent of practices. They showed the complexity of action sequences and where activities overlapped. They also showed individual levels of participation in the events, shifts in prominence of different participants, and indicated how that could be related to knowledge, power, agency, and identity.

A transcript of talk created in NVivo was exported to a table in MS Word (Figure 5), which was expanded for further analysis, with columns for talk, practical actions, texts, tools, and discourses. Finally, actions were sequenced and grouped into job seeking stages, according to goals (Bedny & Karwowski, 2004) identified in the data, for example "searching"; "reading an advert"; "logging into a recruitment account"; or "uploading a CV." Each case study was analyzed separately, followed by meta-analysis, to ascertain connections across the cases (Figure 6), in terms of broader intersecting discourses and practices in different interaction spaces (Jones, 2005).

The next section presents findings from one extract of data analysis from each CS, before discussing their connections.

Findings

CS1 JK at the Charity Work Club: "Are you fit?"

The research site is an inner-city hub of a major charity that works to alleviate the impacts of poverty, though volunteer-run community enterprises, clubs, and classes. Job seekers JK (M) and Selden (F) were a married couple in their late 50s-early 60s, settled in the United Kingdom for 6 years. From Bhutan, they were fluent in Hindi and Urdu and spoke very basic English. They were weekly work club regulars and had a good rapport with their volunteer, Brian. They were mandated to apply online for 5-9 jobs a week each, but had no computer at home and needed help with literacy, language, and IT. They participated easily in the work club banter, a blend of Hindi, Urdu, and English, typical of the wider community it served. Brian often ran the work club and inducted new volunteers. Shona, a mature student from Zimbabwe, was a new volunteer learning from Brian.

This extract is from one of their weekly work club sessions. Brian was sitting between Selden and novice volunteer, Shona (Figure 7). Shona was working with JK, to her left and Brian was working with Selden, while also coaching Shona on volunteering practices. This vacancy was for a part-time cleaning job.

Explaining the Job

JK can read simple texts with familiar words, so was seated at the monitor, ready to participate fully in reading and understanding the job description. The action opened as Shona explained a job description, negotiating with JK for permission to apply. Shona's initial talk concerned establishing the suitability of the job. Rather than simply reading aloud or to herself only, she turned to JK and acted out key information from the advert as she read (Figure 8). JK mirrored her gestures, sometimes hesitantly, perhaps to clarify understanding. Shona also spontaneously recast the key points in the job description in more simple language, for a less expert EAL user.

Shona and JK's actions and talk show both were completely engrossed in understanding the job advert, to the extent of almost performing the text together. Shona's use of gesture, posture and eye movement made JK laugh, and they were close collaborators, striving for mutual understanding, during these two minutes.

There was also a brief exchange around norms of workplace behavior and reliability, as they joked about phoning in sick below:

> Shona: Must be reliable.
>
> Shona turns to JK, smiles and leans towards him conspiratorially.
>
> JK: Reliable?
>
> JK does head wobble.
>
> Shona: No off sick
>
> JK and Shona look at each other and laugh.
>
> JK: Hahahaha ah!
>
> JK puts his hands over his face, laughing.

Such moments of intense communication between JK, Selden and their volunteers tended to happen at the end of the session, when volunteers were summarizing job application targets, so this was unusual. There was significant task modification in Shona's collaboration with JK to negotiate consent to apply, their immediate goal, and much of the work was about clarifying meaning, to ensure genuine self-appraisal.

"Is it worth it?"

Suddenly, Brian interjected to point out the job was just 2 hours a day. Brian and Shona's ideas about "suitable work" differed: Shona was concerned about the length and cost of travel, i.e., the economic value of work to the worker: "Is it worth travelling there?" Brian echoed job center discourses about travelling a reasonable distance: "Yeah because it's in [town] he'll be still able to travel," a discourse of individual responsibility for employment, rather than acknowledging systemic barriers, such as poor transport networks or an inadequate supply of appropriate jobs, which demonstrably existed here:

> Shona: I know but it's in [town] seven pound fifty how much is the day rider?
>
> Brian: Four pound ten

Their different attitudes were conveyed as much in their intonation as what they said. Brian sounded reasonably optimistic, "I know I know it looks very you know.. [town] ..it's just up the road actually" while Shona's voice had a downward intonation: (sighing) "That's fine" as she

considered the distance and expense of travel in relation to the working hours. Both were drawing on local knowledge, but Shona lived locally, whereas Brian did not.

Brian was very experienced at Indeed applications, so could probably anticipate the simplicity of the application, and that there was only a slim chance of an interview. Both likely led to his positive evaluation of the application, as it would contribute to meeting JK's target number of job applications, which had to be done in that hour.

Shona's focus on engaging with JK and negotiating permission to apply for the job with his full compliance was dropped, as she was persuaded by Brian's repetition of the more dominant discourse, that any work experience is worthwhile, even when there is no economic benefit. In effect, JK would be working for free, but he was not consulted and was relegated from being a co-participant in the application, to being totally dependent on the volunteers' judgement. A new goal, contributing to job seeking targets, was imposed by Brian's intervention. Shona's activity changed from genuinely applying for suitable work for JK, to welfare compliance.

Applying

After clicking "apply," this application took 14 seconds and is an example of the routine application practices used in the work club. As observed elsewhere, Shona checked the contact details but made no edits to the CV itself. The breath-taking speed of this application drives the discourse about online applications being "easier,", a discourse used to justify a welfare policy of forcing claimants to apply online to be eligible for job seeker benefits, and the use of job seeking targets.

Equally concerning, the pressure to meet targets means that there is no knowledge transfer to the job seeker: applications were frequently done without JK or Selden's involvement, and they were not helped to articulate their own desires. The ease and speed of a click-through application on a recruitment platform such as Indeed often prevented this, as here.

CS2 Parastou at Home

Parastou was a senior contract manager before coming to the United Kingdom 4 years previously, to study for an MSc in Business. Circumstances changed in her final

year and her family was forced to apply for asylum. She had only recently been granted permission to work and was unaware she could use her university careers service after graduation. As her English and IT skills were very advanced, she had received minimal support from PES, beyond a session to add key words to her CV. Somewhat confusingly, she had also been advised by PES and recruiters to aim for lower-level work as she had "no experience in the UK." In this extract, she was at home, checking emails for administration assistant vacancies on her mobile. I am spontaneously providing support. She has just rejected one vacancy, as it mentioned proofreading skills, and now she was reading another email, for an HR administration assistant.

HR Assistant, Advertised on Reed.co.uk

Parastou could immediately relate to the Human Resources discourse in the advertisement, which referred to a "CIPD qualification" (unfamiliar to me), by drawing on her academic knowledge, which supplied the motivation to read further. The application lasted ten minutes, during which Parastou handled long sequences of information related to the different tasks she carried out. The most difficult and time-consuming was understanding the metaphor of "employee life cycle" (Figure 9) listed under "required skills": five of the 10 minutes is devoted to this. Parastou did not tailor her CV or write a cover letter for this application, being unaware of their importance for signaling her match to a specific vacancy.

Recognizing the phrase was a metaphor, understanding what it meant, then interpreting this in relation to its appearance as a "skill" in the job description presented a significant series of challenges. Initially, Parastou unconsciously drew on her digital information management skills and consciously on her academic knowledge, and English. If Parastou had not recognized the CIPD qualification, nor identified strongly with human resources discourses ("I did lots of HR"), she may have decided against applying, once faced with unpicking the above.

Although it took only 10 minutes of time, very intense work was being done, therefore her motivation had to be high. I guessed what "life cycle" meant, immediately recognizing a metaphor, and immediately suggested a Google search. The first search result, filled with advertisements, deterred her from reading further, so

I attempted to explain the metaphor, but Parastou did not understand the connection with the job advert. She needed to work out both what the metaphor meant and its use in the advert, under the heading of "skills," itself an ill-defined term.

Parastou seemed to interpret "skill" as an ability to do something, whereas my interpretation related to my perception of the job grade, based on the responsibilities and pay. An expert English user, with knowledge of the employment field, could make an informed judgement about this, but we could only make an educated guess. We pooled her academic knowledge with my linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness of the position of low paid administrators in an employment hierarchy, to understand the metaphor use in the job advert, that despite its categorization under "skills" (Figure 9) it was more a matter of "knowing about" than "doing."

This collaborative interpretation of "employee life cycle skill" as "knowing about" resulted in a positive self-appraisal from Parastou, motivating her to research the meaning further and as she skimmed through a very detailed explanation of the concept, her confidence increased. Her final decision to "just apply" was thus made very quickly. Parastou's motivation to engage in the demands of "thinking" was much higher when she could identify with something familiar in the advert. Not understanding acronyms or concepts in relation to the job descriptions interfered with her understanding of the roles and ultimately her perception of her employability.

CS3- Fernando and Robina in the ESOL Center Student Job Club

"Searching"

Fernando was a teenage school leaver, recently arrived from Italy to join family. He was a full-time student at the large local ESOL center and was looking for a part-time job, having never worked before. Robina ran the center job club and was an ESOL specialist with a counselling background. As Fernando was very unsure what kind of work he wanted, Robina suggested they log in to a recruitment site, Total Jobs, and search based on location, working hours and salary, rather than job title. The action opened when, after more than ten minutes of skimming through the results of this progressively more filtered job search, supermarket work caught Fernando's attention.

Fernando's cursor hovered on the job title "sales assistant" and his questioning intonation as he said "This one is sales assist" signaled uncertainty but also potential interest in an area of work. Throughout this part of the search, Robina drew on her ability to simplify information, relating the somewhat abstract job title "sales assistant" to the concrete observable practices of serving customers in a shop:

> Robina: Assistant sales assistant means you work erm behind the counter or in a shop and you sell things to people so it's like a shop assistant
>
> Fernando lets go of the mouse and turns to look at Robina. He nods at her explanation, turns back to the screen and continues to scroll.

Fernando then adopted the same strategy as Robina, of describing the practices of the role, to begin to define his career identity, even though he lacked the precise vocabulary to express this more fluently. He used words and gestures, miming the actions of picking up products and putting them down elsewhere.

In so doing, Fernando refined and communicated his real goal – one which he had appraised himself as capable of achieving. Robina lacked the recruitment terminology but Fernando's description and miming of his nascent career identity led to Robina's statement "OK, so that job erm is called 'shelf stacker'."

> Robina: Ha ha people in supermarkets often do many jobs so sometimes they stack the shelves and sometimes they work on the till
>
> She waves her hand from side to side.
>
> Fernando: Ah
>
> Robina: And sometimes they do different things erm OK if you want you can search for shelf stacker and let's see just be curious and see if it exists
>
> She waves at the screen and Fernando picks up the mouse again.

In saying "let's just be curious," Robina encouraged an experimental approach to searching, creating the opportunity for trial and error with different key word combinations.

Robina and Fernando's activity was one of exploratory, collaborative learning, embedded in the conscious goal of searching for a job. In fact, they were developing Fernando's perceived employability. This was evident in the encouragement provided by Robina, whose motivating activity was not to find Fernando a job, but to help him to explore possibilities, which she did by helping him to access the search discourse.

The search term "shelf stacker," as predicted by Robina, did not reflect retail employment practices, and so the Total Jobs website, designed for more industry specific job titles, such as "pick and packer" did not produce relevant results. Nevertheless, there was no external pressure to find a job. This unfolding event was shaped by Robina's willingness to let Fernando experiment during the process of achieving his goal of finding a suitable vacancy. This experimentation also gave her time to reflect on alternative ways to achieve his goal, based on personal experience, cultural knowledge that contributed significant efficiency to the search.

Fernando's default search tool is Google, and while he experimented with this, Robina remembered that supermarkets often have their own recruitment websites. Asking him about his nearest supermarket, she focuses the search on his local supermarket, Tesco. Later, as they read the adverts on Tesco careers, and began an application form, Robina explained some of the social expectations of supermarket work, using a simple work schedule as a starting point for rich life lessons.

Fernando's conscious goal of finding a job was somewhat different from his activity, which was learning language and retail work practices, and appraising himself in relation to these. In other words, he was simultaneously developing his perceived employability and the language with which to express it.

Discussion

Self-Appraisal and Welfare Compliance

The analysis shows how self-appraisal shapes perceived employability in interaction with the available resources and circumstances and moreover, how digital welfare compliance constrains the development of perceived employability. The findings add insight into the use of digital mediation to earlier studies about migrant job seeker literacies (Bhatia, 1993; Del Percio, 2018). Wheeler and Dillahunt (2018) refer to the use of knowledge brokers that helped secure work in the final stage of job seeking, and this study shows these could be relevant much earlier, to mitigate some of the constraints of online mediation.

 All the case studies demonstrated that perceived employability involved self-appraisal right from the beginning of the search, and that discourses of both

searching and specialized employer sectors were vital. JK's extract shows the contradictions in doing Dillahunt et al.'s (2021) preparatory and active phases of job hunting simultaneously. Like Casey (2022), it demonstrates how welfare compliance and technological compulsion reduces PES to simply accessing technical support. It also shows how much of the literacy work is obscured and rendered inaccessible to the job seeker wanting to develop their individual perceptions of employability. The implication for PES practitioners is the need to ensure that pedagogy, not welfare compliance, is at the forefront of employability development.

Self-Appraisal and Language Repertoires

Shona successfully helped JK to read and understand normative expectations for cleaning work. However, JK's multilingual repertoire is not recognized as an employability resource, despite the work club being a multilingual space in a very diverse community. The workplace itself is the site of much situated language learning, as Clayton et al. (2016) note. JK's fluency in local community languages could be sufficient for entry into a multilingual workplace, where others act as literacy and language brokers. JK himself wanted to be put directly in touch with an employer and shown the work, rather than waste his time and energy on trying to meet the literacy demands of mandated online applications, themselves harder than any job. This would genuinely facilitate his perceptions of employability, something which Berglund and Wallinder (2015) found contributed also to resilience in times of precarity. It is imperative that PES advisors acknowledge individual job seekers' wishes and help them mobilize their resources according to the local environmental context, as Shona had begun to do.

Initial Self-Appraisal and Literacy Brokers

Literacy (Papen, 2010) or knowledge brokers (Wheeler & Dillahunt, 2018) contributed significantly to ongoing motivation. Shona, Robina and I spontaneously engaged in exploratory and explanatory talk around the texts. This was vital for unpacking the social practices implicit in the job adverts and in Parastou's case, enabled insight into how the role fit into the workplace hierarchy. Time is needed for exploratory personalized discussions around preparing for work, in which PES advisors and clients can share their local and cultural knowledge.

Even deciding to apply required an emergent perception of employability. Robina helped Fernando here, by beginning a very shallow self-appraisal based on geographical location and working hours-basic needs and circumstances. Basic digital search literacies, such as filtering, could form part of a PES syllabus for low-educated job seekers. Somebody who can read words and simple sentences, and use a keyboard and mouse, e.g., JK, could be supported to start searching online in this way. Similarly, experimenting with key words, that belong to particular industry discourses, could be taught, as Robina did. Robina's insights led to the eventual success of Fernando's job search and self-appraisal. She also shared knowledge of specific recruitment practices, for example corporate in-house careers websites, such as Tesco, a knowledge gap highlighted in the literature (Dillahunt et al., 2021; Green, 2017; Scott et al., 2022; Wheeler & Dillahunt, 2018). The above examples show that small practical interventions can make searching and self-appraising easier and increase motivation to persevere.

Tailoring Online Applications

The speed and convenience of online applications resulted in less tendency to tailor CVs and covering messages, which Bhatia (1993) regards as vital. Surprisingly, Parastou also neglected this, which underlines the importance of connecting migrant job seekers with literacy brokers or mentors relevant to their fields and roles of work, when ready.

Mentoring would benefit all job seekers and could be integrated into online PES, affording the genuine personalized orientation so lacking in algorithmic tools (Scott et al., 2022). With mentor input, a perceived employability syllabus could move towards job activation stage genres. Job seekers could be taught how to signal their match very specifically by deploying discourses used in candidate briefs, job descriptions and advertisements, beyond mere inclusion of generic key words to make CVs machine readable. This is what Parastou, like professional participants in previous studies (e.g., Willott & Stevenson, 2013), lacked.

Implications for Practitioners

Self-appraisal is a collaborative ongoing endeavor towards developing a perception of employability, which both

demands and encourages oracy development. All job seekers need to learn to express their beliefs, needs and desires, as well as identify and mobilize relevant knowledge, experience and bridging capital. Knowledge of host country work, education and welfare systems cannot be assumed. Practitioners can foster more realistic self-appraisal by explaining, for example, qualification levels, vocational pathways and sector jargon, teaching language for describing relevant experience, and how to use bridging capital, e.g., for references. Prioritizing even very simple personalized discussions helps job seekers to self-appraise and thus search more effectively, understand recruitment discourses when reading adverts and eventually complete successful applications.

Limitations and Future Directions

The case studies were limited to two neighboring northern United Kingdom cities. Different research sites and participants could have produced very different results, as could other methods, such as focus group interviews. However, the findings align with other studies about online PES and migrants looking for work and add to their recommendations.

Using actions as the unit of analysis, rather than the somewhat broader unit of observable practices, such as writing application emails, meant that only quite short sequences of data could be analyzed in close detail. Nevertheless, such close attention to micro-level actions such as clicking and scrolling enabled the pinpointing of the complex demands of online job-seeking literacies and could be a fruitful method for further employability literacies research, especially with increasing use of online only PES.

Conclusion

Job search literacies reflect an intricate web of situated practices, requiring insider knowledge, without which even well-educated job seekers struggle to self-appraise and develop their perceived employability. The speed and convenience of online applications under benefits conditionality can thwart the development of perceived employability, and associated literacies. However, perceived employability can be developed, even for low educated EAL job seekers, by teaching literacies associated with initial self-appraisal, such as learning to use key word for basic searches, using filtering functions, and unpacking "soft skills" discourses.

Separating the literacies required in preparatory and active job seeking phases, combined with mentoring, would increase opportunities to learn about broader recruitment processes, the social world of work and specific workplace discourses and practices, necessary in Green's (2017) employability framework and so desired by migrants (Cheesbrough et al., 2018; Green et al., 2011; Marangozov, 2014; Scott et al., 2022).

An important ethical question for PES practitioners is, "Am I developing employability, or am I merely supporting welfare compliance?" Without personalized support, disadvantaged groups may remain trapped in a system of performative job seeking, simply to access welfare, and risk permanent underemployment or complete exclusion. In the context of welfare rationing, integration and longer working lives, such a situation is another negative vortex for all.

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TABLE 1: Details of research sites, participants and data collected for each case study.

	Case study 1	Case study 2	Case study 3	Data collected
Job seekers	Selden (wife) and JK (husband)	Parastou (F)	Fernando (M)	Video, screenshots, photos, texts used in interactions, follow up interviews
Age	Late 50s/early 60s	40	18	
Arrival in United Kingdom	6 years before, under refugee resettlement program	4 years before; forced to claim asylum in final year	3 months before to join family	
Education and work	No formal schooling; agriculture and road construction (JK); domestic and agriculture (Selden). Languages: Dzongkha, Nepali; Hindi and Urdu; basic English	MSc Intl. Business, U. K. university; successful management career Languages: Farsi; very advanced English (for academic purposes)	ESOL level 1 in further education college (England); Italian high school certificate, no work experience. Languages: Italian, Ghanaian; intermediate English	
Data collection site	Charity work club	Parastou's home	Student job club	
Support staff	Volunteer Brian: from UK Volunteer Shona: from Zimbabwe, student in UK	Me: participant observer, UK.	Learning support assistant Robina: from UK	

FIGURE 1: NVivo transcript and video with coding/action labels
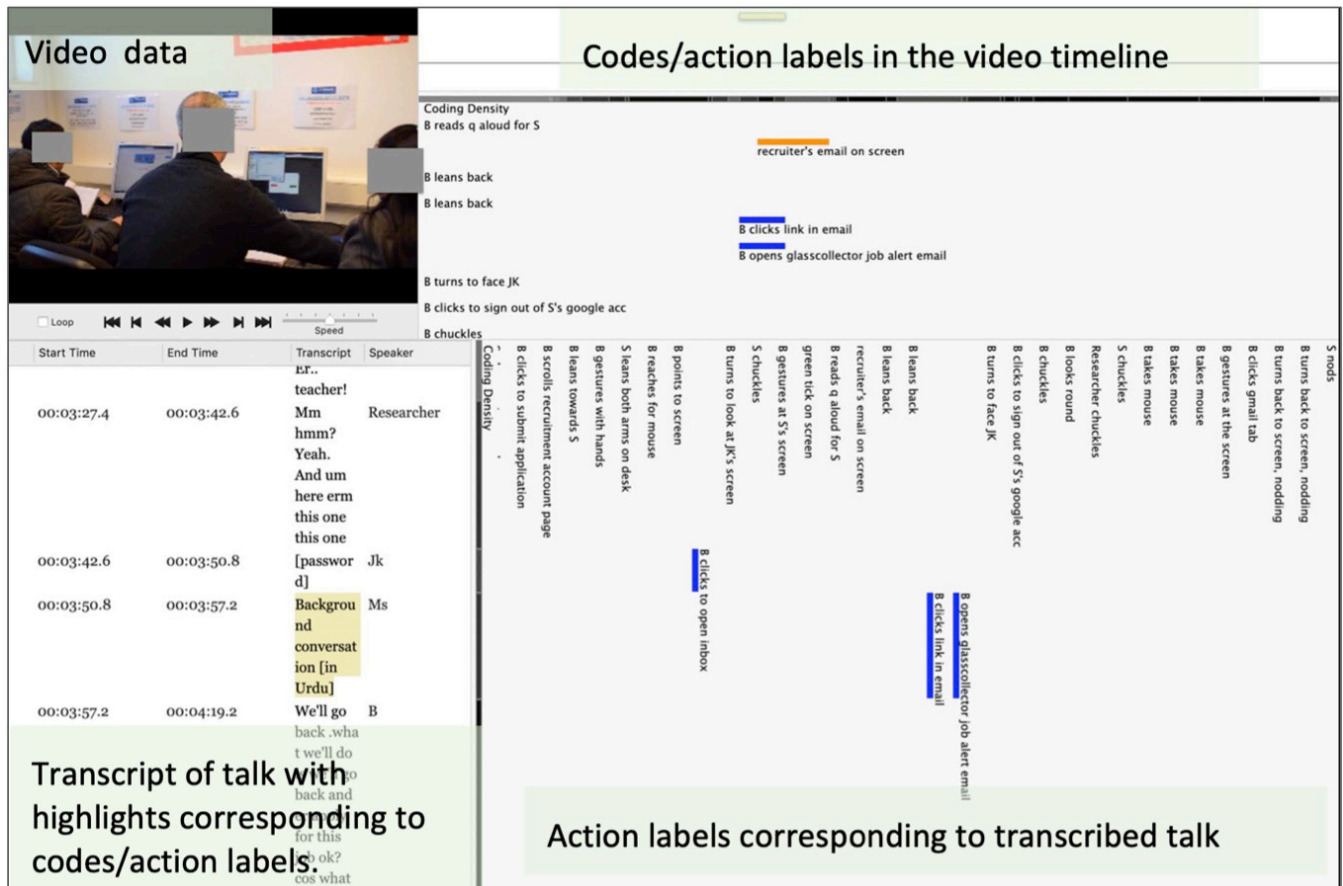
FIGURE 2: Screenshot of coding showing higher level actions, e.g., B writes an email job application; B types activity history into UJM
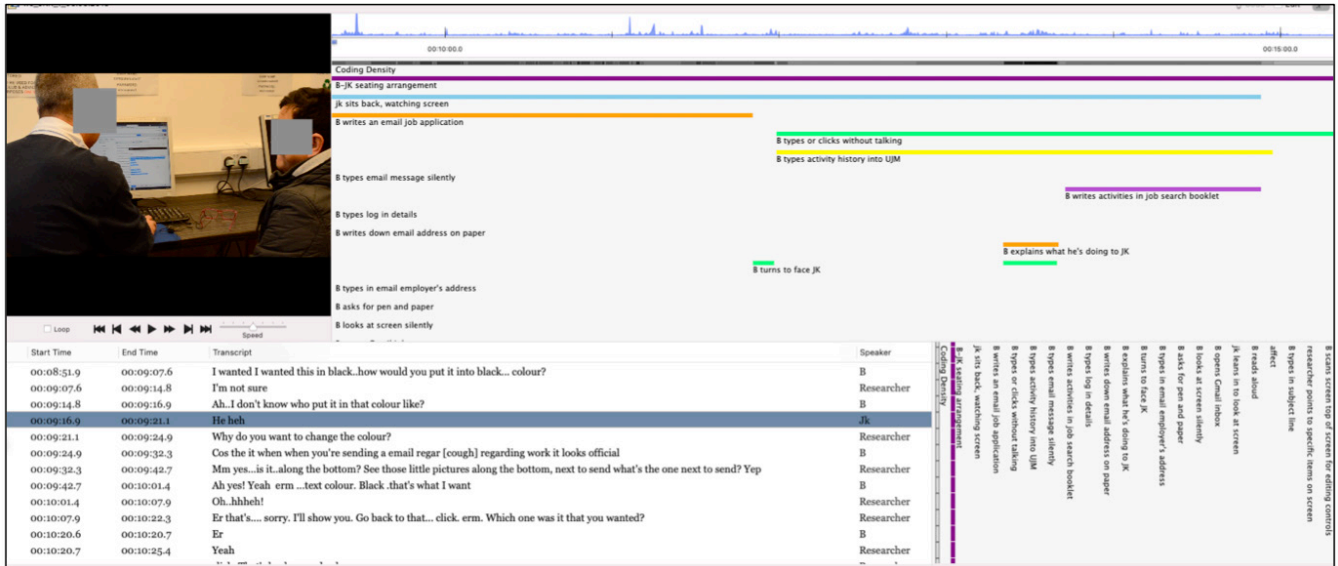
FIGURE 3: Screenshot showing intermediate and lower-level actions, e.g., B types in employer's address; B types in subject line.

FIGURE 4: Screenshot showing function blocks becoming conscious actions, e.g., B highlights entire email text with mouse; B clicks to change text color
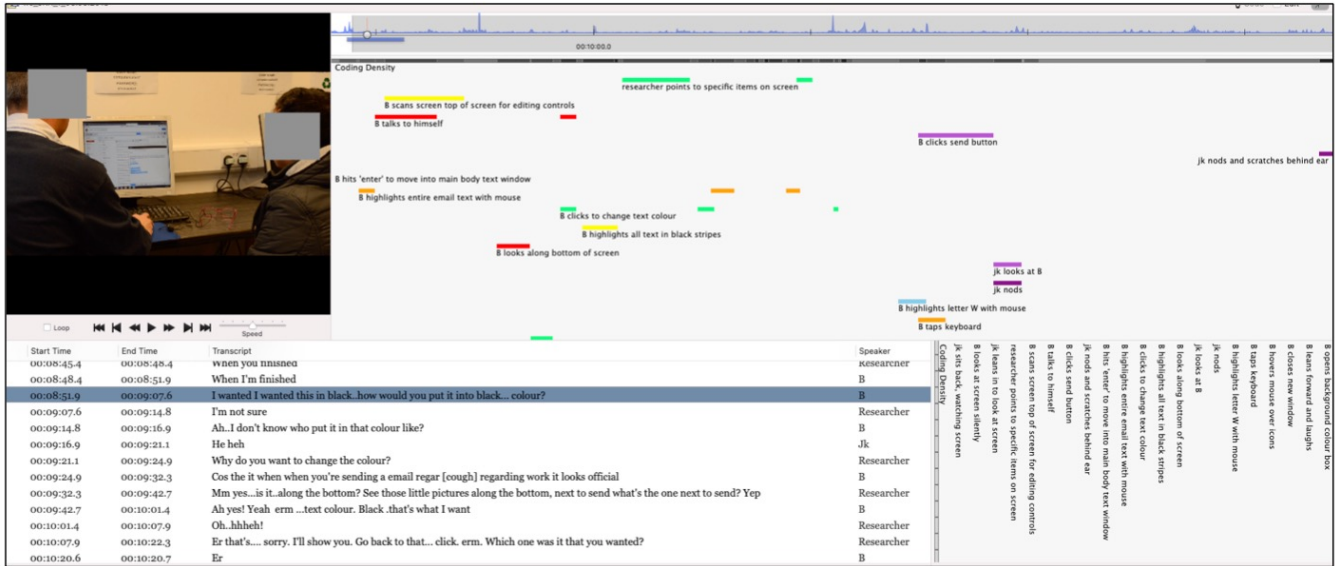
FIGURE 5: Example of multimodal transcript used for analysis

FIGURE 6: Mind map for RQ based on 3 levels of activity (Bedny et al., 2000; Leontev 1981) and showing spaces of interaction (Jones, 2005)
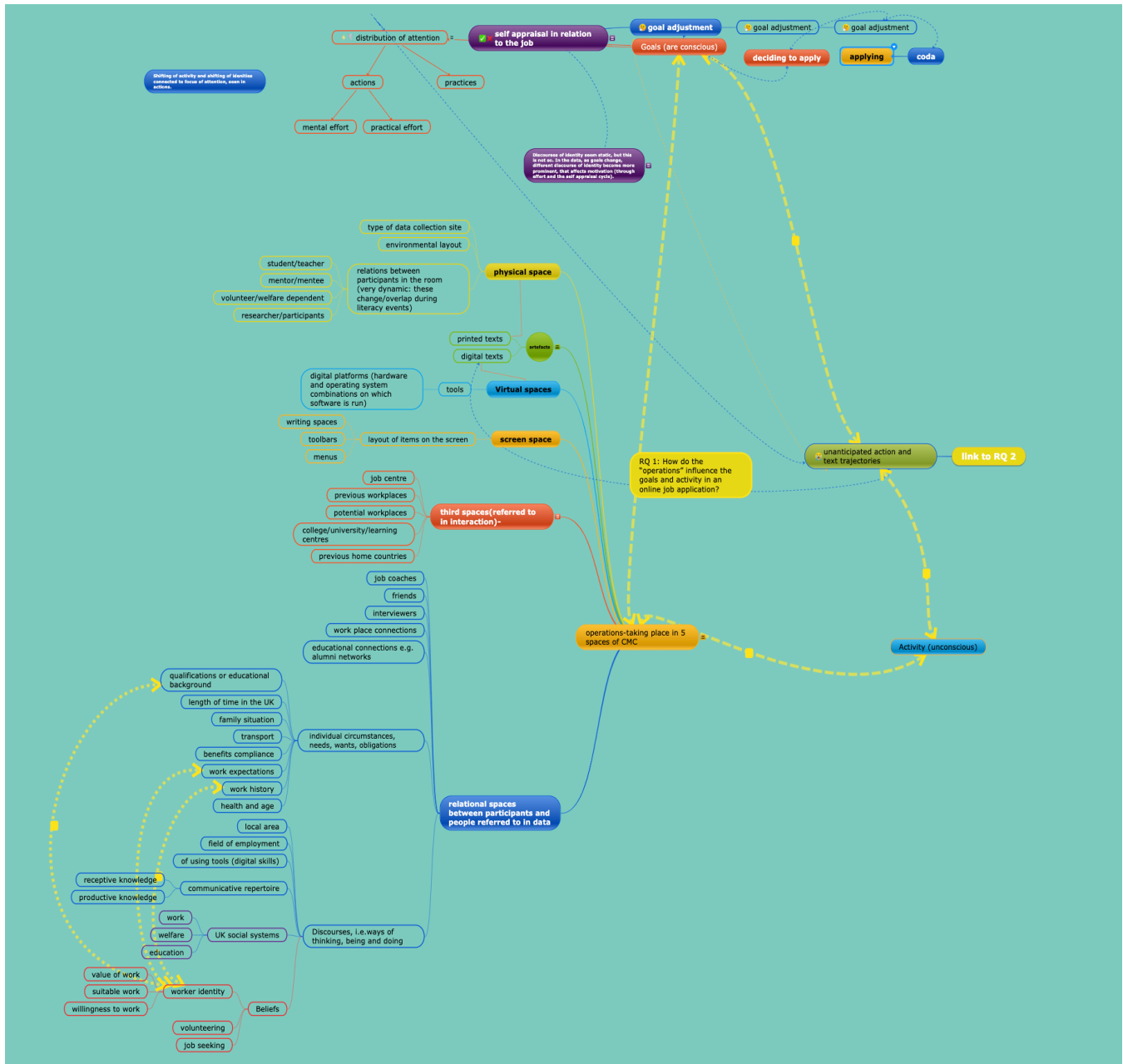
**FIGURE 7:** Participant seating at the computers for "Are you fit?"

JK   Shona (volunteer)   Brian (volunteer)   Selden
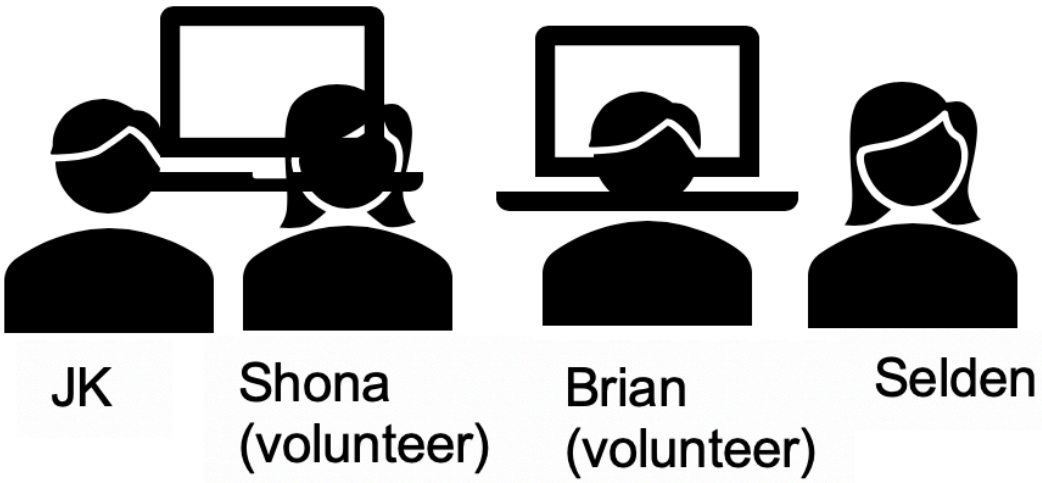
FIGURE 8: Shona re-entextualises the job advert for JK
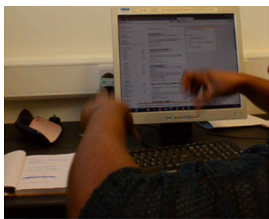
Hoovering
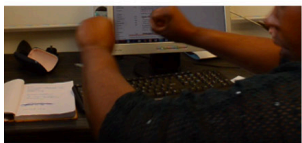
Heavy machines
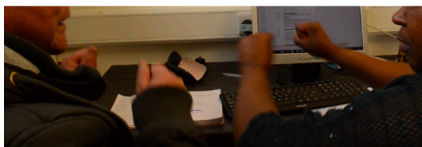
This one?
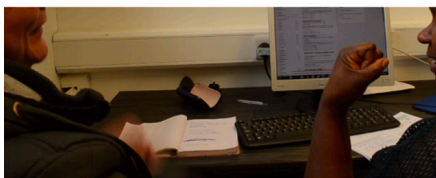
Strong man?
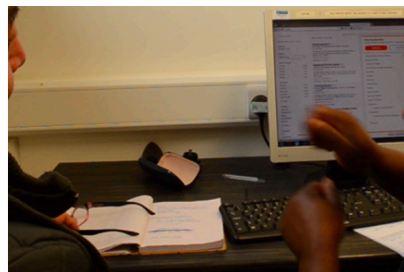
Keys
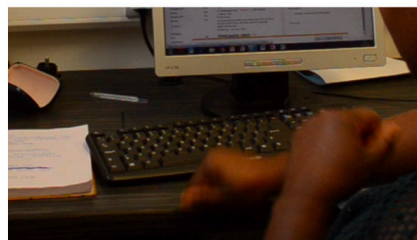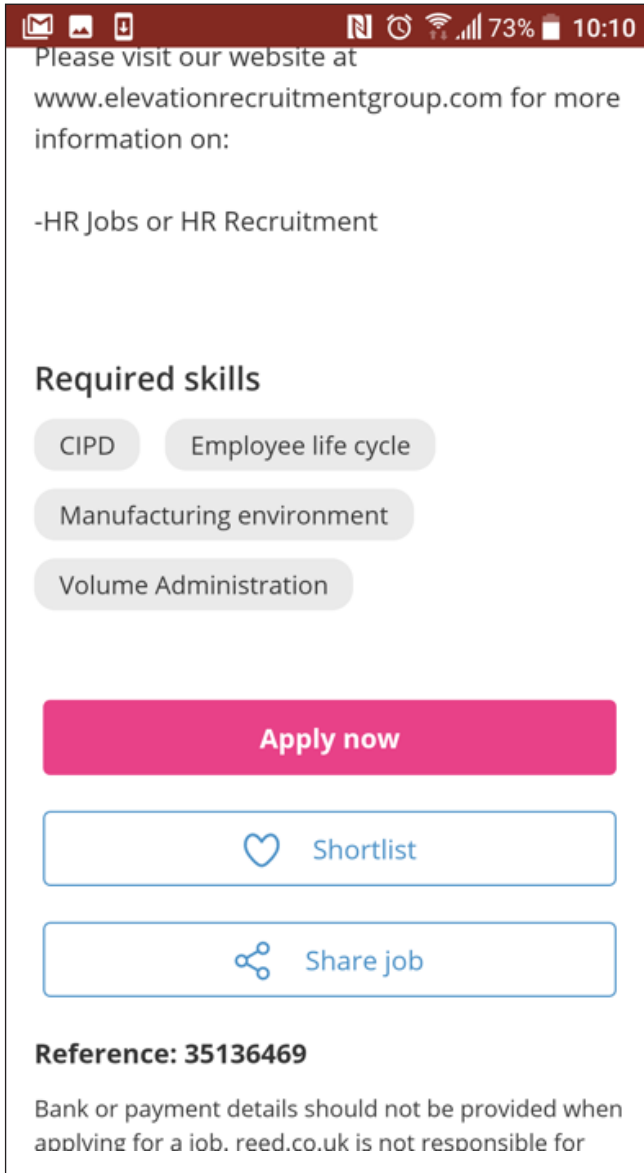
Dusting
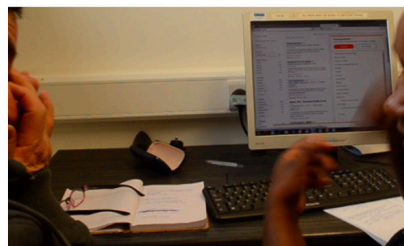
Phoning sick

FIGURE 9: required skills, listen in the advert