School of Linguistics and
Applied Language Studies

Enhancing Socio-pragmatic Skills among

Professional Qualified Workers

Janet Holmes, Meredith Marra, Jonathon Newton,
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Language in the Workplace
Occasional Papers No.10 (October 2009)

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Language in the Workplace
Occasional Papers

This series of occasional papers is aimed at providing a wide range of information about the way language is used in the New Zealand workplace. The first paper outlines the aims and scope of the core project, the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, and describes the approach adopted by the project team in collecting and analysing workplace data. The second describes the methodology adopted to collect workplace interaction, and its developments and adaptations to the very different demands of disparate workplaces. Subsequent papers provide more detailed analyses of particular aspects of workplace interaction as well as descriptions of methodologies for researching workplace communication.

These include

- an analysis of varied ways people get things done at work, or the forms which directives take in different New Zealand workplaces

- an exploration of the functions of humour in workplace interaction

- an analysis of the structure of formal meetings in relation to the way decisions are reached

- an examination of the varied literature on the role of e-mail at work

- an analysis of problem-solving discourse

The series is available in full text at this website: http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp

Abstract

Although socio-pragmatic skills have been identified as important aspects of communicative competence in the workplace, little research has been undertaken to evaluate the effects of classroom-based support in developing these areas of language proficiency. Nor has the potential for incorporating a critical component in such support been explored.

New Zealand attracts an increasing number of professional migrants with the potential to make a considerable contribution to New Zealand society. However, many find it difficult to secure permanent employment. Inadequate communication skills are identified by employers as a major obstacle to hiring migrants. Migrants themselves also identify increased English proficiency as a desirable goal. Whether these perceptions of what is required to secure employment are accurate or not is worthy of investigation.

This paper outlines an innovative collaborative project with workplaces willing to offer temporary placements to professional migrants on our Workplace Communication Skills course. The primary goal is to evaluate the extent to which the socio-pragmatic skills acquired in the course prove relevant once the migrants enter a New Zealand workplace. Analysis will focus on identifying changes in the migrants' socio-pragmatic proficiency in a range of aspects of relational discourse which have been identified as crucial to effective workplace communication.

BIONOTES

The writers are team members and research associates of Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project (www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/lwp).

JANET HOLMES is Director of the Language in the Workplace Project and holds a personal Chair in Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington where she teaches a variety of sociolinguistics courses. She has published on a wide range of topics including New Zealand English, language and gender, sexist language, pragmatic particles, compliments and apologies, and most recently on aspects of workplace discourse.

MEREDITH MARRA is Research Officer for Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project and a lecturer in sociolinguistics within the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. Meredith's primary research interest is the language of business meetings, but she has also published in the areas of humour and gender in workplace interactions.

ANGELA JOE is the English Proficiency Programme Director in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, a role which incorporates responsibility for a course in workplace communication for skilled migrants.

JONATHAN NEWTON is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington. He teaches courses in second language acquisition and language teaching methodology and is currently developing resources for workplace communication training for EAL migrants.

NICKY RIDDIFORD is a teacher at the English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington. She has taught EAL and EAP in many contexts including at university level, at language schools and at community institutes over the last 23 years. She is currently teaching on a workplace communication course for skilled migrants.

BERNADETTE VINE is Corpus Manager of the Archive of New Zealand English, which includes management of the processing, transcription, archiving and databases for the Language in the Workplace Project. Within the area of workplace research, Bernadette's publications have focussed on the use of directives at work.

Enhancing socio-pragmatic skills among professionally qualified workers[i]

Introduction

This paper focuses on ways in which applied linguists can assist skilled migrants with EAL to work comfortably and rewardingly in professional workplaces. In particular, we grasp the nettle of the inherent tensions between the new migrants' desire to "fit in" and obtain secure employment, and their need to assert their expertise and construct a professional identity in a new environment. Often these two desires are at odds: fitting in requires adapting to the new culture and its sociolinguistic and communicative norms, and this is often best achieved, at least initially, by taking a background role, quietly observing and responding to rather than initiating interaction. Constructing oneself as an expert, on the other hand often requires relatively assertive and forceful behaviour, at least in some contexts. Balancing these conflicting needs is often a challenge for new migrants, but it has rarely been explicitly identified.[ii]

Most current approaches to preparing people for workplaces where English is the dominant language adopt an ESP framework, focusing on the learners' perceived needs in terms of developing proficiency in the language. Moreover, the prevailing approach to needs analysis entails a survey of learners' needs before a course begins (Johns 1981; Robinson 1991). However, the way in which the learners' needs are determined varies considerably from course to course. As Long (2005: 2-5) points out, there are hundreds of reports of needs analyses in the research literature, but relatively few discussions of how an effective needs analysis should be conducted. There are also a wide range of views on what should be included, and just how wide the canvas should be when surveying learners' needs. In this paper, we focus on an area of needs analysis that has attracted relatively little attention to date, namely, the need for the learner to feel potentially influential and empowered in their new employment situation.

Our approach to needs analysis has been predominantly task-oriented, but, as indicated above, with a rather broader definition of "task" than is common in the needs analysis literature, since it encompasses the challenge of negotiating professional identity in a workplace where one is a minority ethnic group member. Working with migrants from a range of countries who come to New Zealand with professional skills in areas such as

accountancy, law, teaching, and medicine, we pay attention not only to our learners' expressed goals but also to their potential employers' attitudes to immigrant workers (cf Derwing and Krahn forthcoming), and their expressed perceptions of their employees' communicative needs. In addition, and importantly, we take account of broad patterns identified in New Zealand workplace communication by our workplace-based research. Our analyses have identified a range of strategies used to acco mplish their transactional and relational goals by effective communicators in influential professional roles in a wide range of workplaces (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a; Holmes 2005a; Holmes and Marra 2006; Holmes 2007). All these considerations inform our work with skilled migrant professionals seeking permanent employment in New Zealand workplaces.

Our approach also incorporates a critical component, reflecting our awareness of "connections between workplace uses of language and relations of power at the institutional and broader social levels" (Pennycook 2001: 19). People seeking work in a country which uses an international language which is not their mother tongue are undoubtedly at some disadvantage. Moreover, despite government legislation and initiatives aimed at supporting biculturalism, some argue that in many ways New Zealand is still a monolingual and ethnocentric society (May 2003).In such a context, even well-educated, skilled migrants regularly experience the effects of the social inequalities and power disadvantages resulting from their cultural and linguistic difference from the dominant majority (Meeuwis and Sarangi 1994; Pennycook 2001; Rampton 2001; Blommaert 2004).

Recent research in which we have been engaged with Maori organisations has provided us with some useful insights in this respect (Holmes, Marra and Vine fc; Kell et al. 2007; Marra 2008). In particular, working in "ethnicised" communities of practice (Schnurr, Marra and Holmes 2007), ie. organisations where Maori values and ways of doing things prevail, where Maori ways of communicating are the norm, and where code-switching is common and unremarkable, it became very apparent that the assumptions underlying many ESP programmes are remarkably ethnocentric. It is easy to assume when offering courses for ESL learners in the context of a largely monolingual society that becoming familiar with a different set of socio-pragmatic norms is a one-way-street. It is those who come from cultural backgrounds other than the majority English-speaking Pakeha group who are expected to make the adjustments, and to learn to speak "appropriately" according to Pakeha sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic norms. Employers simply expect those from other

countries and cultures to adapt to New Zealand norms, as if this "goes without saying". The concept of "tolerability" (Grin 1995; May 2001) or accommodation to the linguistic and cultural norms of those from another culture is never considered. And the even more revolutionary notion that Pakeha employers might appreciate the multilingual repertoires and sociolinguistic proficiency of their employees, accepting and perhaps even adapting to different socio-cultural norms, is never contemplated.

What emerges from these considerations is a concern with understanding the sociolinguistic context and socio-pragmatic dimensions of workplace interaction. This provides the basis for an approach which aims to empower professional migrant learners to undertake their own analyses of what is going on in workplace interactions (Benesch 1996; Byram 1997, 2006a, 2006b, Roberts et al. 2001; Newton 2006; Holmes et al fc). In the words of Clark and Ivanic (1997: 217), the goal is to

> "empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help
> them reflect on their own language experiences and practices and on the language
> practices of others in the institutions of which they are a part and in the wider
> society in which they live"

In addition, we have also begun to consider how to address the challenge of the contribution of employers' attitudes to the extent of learners' workplace communicative success. One objective here is to provide information which may raise employers' awareness of the distinctive socio-cultural norms of their employees, thus hopefully increasing understanding of different ways of expressing requests, disagreements, refusals, and so on. A longer term goal will entail developing an appreciation of the richness of the communicative and cultural resources which their employees bring to the workplace. In short, we are interested in approaches which empower, rather than approaches which attempt to make people 'fit' (Pennycook 2001; Rampton 2001; Eades 2004).

The VUW Workplace Communication Skills course for Professional Migrants
In 2005, Victoria University of Wellington was contracted to provide language-focused training courses for skilled migrants who had been unable to find work in their chosen professions in New Zealand for at least two years. The twelve-week course begins with a five-week in-class component followed by a six-week workplace placement (with each Monday afternoon spent back in class), and concludes with a final week in class. The course

aims to assist skilled migrants to develop communication skills which will facilitate their attempts to gain employment within their chosen profession in New Zealand. One goal of the initial five week block is therefore to develop awareness of characteristic features of communication in NZ workplaces.[iii]

Two main sources provide information on crucial features of communication in New Zealand professional workplaces. Firstly a survey of employers undertaken by Podsiadlowski (2006, 2007), and secondly the extensive research of the Wellington Language in the Workplace (LWP) project team (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a, www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/lwp). Podsiadlowski's research indicates that "inadequate communication skills" are repeatedly identified by employers as major obstacles to hiring migrants, while the LWP project research emphasises that both transactional and relational aspects of communication are important in effective workplace talk.

In order to enrol in the course, professional migrants are required to be reasonably proficient in English (e.g. IELTS 6.5), and, of course, they are all qualified and experienced experts in their professional areas. Hence their control of the transactional aspects of workplace talk is generally adequate: they know how to do the job and they know the technical language associated with doing it. It is the relational aspects of workplace interaction which are typically more challenging. Employers frequently identify relational talk as a problem area (eg. Podsiadlowski 2005. See also Clyne 1994; Spoonley et al. 2004, 2006/2007, 2007). They comment that workers have all the skills necessary to do the job, but that they seem unfriendly or uncomfortable at work; they don't seem to fit in smoothly. The reasons for these impressions can generally be traced to problems with handling the social or relational aspects of communication, rather than proficiency in English more generally (Brown 2000).

In a recent interview undertaken by Nicky Riddiford, the course coordinator, Lynn, a manager in the recruitment company with whom we work, described how one of the employers commented that

>"they just couldn't see how the skilled migrants could do the interaction. They weren't sure about the migrants' cultural background and whether they would be able to cope in a way that's appropriate to New Zealanders with senior people and prestigious people from out in the community. Would they be too subservient?"

She went on to describe Wellington as a "relationship town" (as opposed to Auckland which she described as a more "commercial city").

> "A lot of business is done over coffee in Wellington … They're not just having a coffee … it's professional business conversations taking place in a more social setting"

She emphasised that "interpersonal skills" are important "being able to get things done through communication".

The employers' ignorance of their employees' socio-cultural norms is another factor which deserves consideration. One New Zealand employer noted, for example, that a very shy young Asian woman was regarded as rude because she did not look directly at people or respond verbally to greetings. Others complained that their Chinese and Korean employees were too direct, and were perceived as rude. An employment consultant and retired manager commented:

> "It isn't just Asians. This applies quite often to Germans and Dutch, where, if they are managing staff they are just too direct with the staff. When they tell senior managers things they are just too direct for the New Zealanders. And some of them end up socially sitting right outside the group because they can't they're not accepted …it's not just language it's about being autocratic"

Underlying these perceptions is the assumption that these employees do not "fit" into the New Zealand workplace. As Lynn notes:

> "employers may state "cultural fit" in terms of office culture as a reason for not employing a migrant… . … it is very easy to interview and employ people who are like themselves and a lot of decisions are made at interviews on that basis".

Such comments also make it clear that it is typically sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic skills, rather than more formal aspects of language, which affect how people are perceived eg. as good workmates, or even as effective workers. (See Vandermeeren (2005) and Downey Bartlett (2005) for further examples of the significance of socio-pragmatic skills in accomplishing effective transactions).

The LWP analyses provided a good deal of information about the communicative skills underlying effective relational talk, as well as an extensive corpus of authentic interactions which could be used in developing appropriate classroom materials. LWP analyses have

demonstrated, for instance, the crucial importance of a range of relationally oriented communicative strategies in establishing good relationships at work. These include small talk and social talk (Holmes 2000, 2005b, 2005c), different types of humour in different workplaces (Holmes and Marra 2002a), diverse ways of giving directives and making requests (Vine 2004), and various ways of expressing negatively affective speech acts, such as refusals, complaints and disagreements in different communities of practice (Daly et al 2004, Holmes and Stubbe 2003b).

Drawing on this research, the Workplace Communication Skills course aims to provide the well-educated migrants with the skills they need to analyse workplace interactions along socio-pragmatic dimensions. As advocated by Byram (1997: 20), this approach provides learners "with the means to analyse and thereby understand and relate to, whatever social world their interlocutors might inhabit". Moreover, as Byram points out, the incorporation of an empowering critical dimension helps prepare learners for encounters beyond those presented in class, and encourages them to see their role not as imitators of native speakers, but as social actors engaging with other social actors in a particular kind of communication and interaction which is different from that between native speakers (1997: 20-21; see also Byram 2006a, 2006b). The course materials are designed to provide the means for people to negotiate, agree and disagree, and, if they choose to do so, to question, flout, contest and resist (Roberts and Sarangi 1995). A simple example here would be the skills and confidence required to insist that colleagues use their name and pronounce it correctly rather than allocating an alternative "easier" name. More radically, role-playing job interviews provides opportunities to practice "working the questions around to accommodate what they have to offer… taking control of the interview to some extent". The materials also encourage critical awareness of the assumptions and values that lie beneath utterances and behaviour, and are aimed at developing the ability to assess situations and recognise multiple interpretations. As Pennycook suggests, "by making people aware of forms of linguistic or ideological oppression, there are possibilities for forms of emancipation. Awareness therefore, becomes a sort of political enlightenment that can lead to empowerment" (2001: 39). The critical dimension is thus fundamental, involving recognition of the dynamic aspects of interaction and the capacity for negotiation or "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001: 112).

The materials are also, importantly, developed from authentic interactions in New Zealand workplaces. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) observes that one cause of non-target like pragmatics is misleading input in teaching materials. She maintains that providing authentic language input is crucial in classroom instruction, a form of "fair play, giving the learners a fighting chance" (2001, p. 30). They provide a means of assisting migrants to become more informed, sensitive, flexible, and strategically equipped communicators in their second language (Tomlinson and Masuhara 2004: 7).

Working with employers

Our LWP research has a well-established record of working on "real world" issues identified in collaboration with "real world" partners (Bygate 2004: 18). We have consistently worked with practitioners to identify issues of mutual interest, drawing on our knowledge of the way language works, and especially our awareness of the immensely important influence of contextual factors on communication in researching those issues. Basing our design as far as possible on the action research principle of research "for and with" our participants (Cameron et al. 1992: 22), we have aimed for a research process which is as open and empowering as possible, and which avoids exploitation of those we work with. Evidence that this approach has been satisfying for both research partners is the frequency with which our advice has been sought on the basis of our expertise. In some organisations we have provided advice about research methodology in areas such as ethical issues, data collection, quality recording, transcription, and data analysis. In others we have run workshops focussing on communication issues identified by the workplace personnel.

Working with professional migrants seeking employment in a diverse range of specialities has involved canvassing the views of a wide range of potential employers. While we have some general information from employers about what they see as the disadvantages and the reasons for not employing migrant workers (Henderson 2007; Podsiadlowski 2006), there is little specific information from particular professional areas. The hundred employers that Astrid Podsiadlowski interviewed identified language proficiency, communication difficulties, and cultural differences (including different attitudes to work) as the chief disadvantages of employing migrants. But the experience and observations of our workplace mentors and support people suggests that a more fundamental issue is often the attitudes and expectation of

the employers towards their employees. Some employers are very positive in their approach, as indicated by this feedback indicating a very open-minded attitude:

> "We felt that this programme was a two-way street, as much of a benefit to us as to Chen so we deliberately threw her in the deep end with all functions of the role, rather than just showing her the simpler aspects of it – which she handled well with assistance from my team."

> "Sam fitted in well with our team. Gave us a fresh face and opinions as well as being a useful worker."

And in a recent interview at our recruitment agency, Lynn, the manager, made similar observations:

> "several employers have said to me that they thought that they were giving to the programme but in actual fact they gained far more than they gave because of the input that skilled migrant was able to have into their processes typically and their understanding".

Another manager added that responsive employers find that employing the skilled migrants

> "bring different ideas, different thinking, a different understanding of how the world operates, what's important to people, that people work differently, live differently".

Other potential employers, however, regard migrant workers through yellow-tinted (ie. jaundiced) spectacles, categorise them as a "perceived risk", and do not appreciate what they offer.

Consequently, we are planning a project which involves a fundamentally collaborative methodology to (a) to systematically document changes, if any, in professional migrant learners' ability to manage workplace interaction, including their ability to undertake their own analyses of what is going on, and to actively construct a satisfying professional identity (b) to investigate the contribution of employers' expectations and attitudes to the extent of learners' workplace communicative success and to identify changes, if any, over the placement period. This approach provides opportunities for self-reflexive techniques combined with direct engagement with issues of relevance to the wider community (Candlin and Candlin 2003, Sarangi and Candlin 2003, Roberts 2003, Candlin and Sarangi 2004,

Sarangi 2006: 215), as well as facilitating the kind of productive, collaborative partnership between researchers and researched that Sarangi advocates (2006: 215).

While what we are proposing has not been undertaken before as far as we are aware, there are valuable synergies with at least two other proposed projects, one in Australia directed by Ingrid Piller and the other in Canada directed by Julie Kerekes. Ingrid Piller is involved in a large-scale, government funded Australian Migrant Communication Project which will track migrants from arrival in Australia through to their exit from English Proficiency courses, and if possible through job interviews and into the workplace. The aim is to involve 10-15 AMEP centres with ideally at least one research site in each Australian state and territory, and to collect data from female and male participants across a range of ages, English proficiency and education levels, and from a range of source regions. The proposed ethnographic methodology draws on our LWP approach so we expect useful synergies from the collaborative relationship which has been established with this project.

Julie Kerekes is similarly planning to focus on the experiences of new migrants, but her particular concern is their experience of employment-seeking or "gate-keeping" interviews in the Canadian context (Kerekes 2003, 2006, 2007, cf Roberts et al. 2008). While the AMEP project will encompass blue collar workers as well as professionals, Kerekes proposes to focus on highly educated and professionally trained immigrants. She will use interactional sociolinguistic analysis to uncover areas of miscommunication that can be improved, with implications for language instruction and employment policies. Again this should provide a useful link to our project since both projects will involve interviews drawing on migrants' experience of communication difficulties in workplace contexts.

The research plan
In what follows we outline the steps in the research project (which is being piloted this year).

A. Stage 1: Interview data
    i. Discussion with course participants to establish
        a. how they perceive their communicative needs
        b. what they expect from the course
        c. how we can work collaboratively to attain their goals

While the specific transactional communication needs of different course participants will differ according to their areas of professional expertise, the LWP research has identified relational communication needs which are relevant across all workplaces. However, the specific ways in which these are instantiated and negotiated will differ in different communities of practice (see, for example, Holmes and Stubbe 2003a).

In particular, this step in the process will address the challenge of communicating to participants the importance of developing not only their analytical skills but also of acquiring ways of expressing different communicative strategies which are comfortable for them and consistent with the stance they wish to express.

    ii. Discussion with employers willing to take placements to establish
        a. how they perceive employees' communicative needs
        b. what they expect from the course
        c. how we can work collaboratively to attain their goals

Potential employers will first be identified according to the professional backgrounds of the course participants. Each course participant's work profile, together with a description of the placement process, and of the Communication Skills course, will then be circulated to the list of potential employers. This will be followed up by phone calls until suitable placements are secured. Willing employers will then be interviewed to establish their expectations of employees, their attitudes towards EAL users, and their expectations of what the course will provide for the employees. We will also explore the possibility of working with employers to provide socio-cultural information which may facilitate the development of greater understanding of their EAL employees.

    iii. Discussion with workplace support people
        a. how they perceive employees' communicative needs
        b. what they expect from the course
        c. how we can work collaboratively to attain their goals

Each employee will be provided with an internal support person or mentor from within the organisation in which they have been placed. In addition, one of our research team will act as a workplace consultant providing further support throughout the internship period, and liaising regularly with the workplace mentor as well as the intern. Workplace mentors will be interviewed at the start of the internship to establish their expectations of their intern, their attitudes towards EAL users, and their expectations of what the course will provide for the intern. We will also explore the possibility of working with the mentor to provide socio-cultural information which may facilitate the development of greater understanding of their EAL intern.

B. Stage 2: Recorded data

i. Collect recorded data to establish workplace interactional norms

Our data collection method has been thoroughly described elsewhere (Stubbe 1998; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a), so here we offer just a brief summary. Its most distinctive feature is the fact that the participants themselves record their everyday workplace talk with as little interference from the research team as possible. Meetings of workplace groups are also video-recorded using cameras which are fixed in place, switched on, and left running for the whole meeting.[iv] As far as possible, then, our policy is to minimise our intrusion as researchers into the work environment while also carefully managing ethical matters and confidentiality which is always a prime concern, both to those being recorded, and to the research team. After the recordings are obtained, the material is processed, selected sections are transcribed, and useful and useable material for instruction is selected for analysis (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a; Marra 2008).

ii. Collect recorded data on participants' proficiency in selected areas (small talk, requests) at start and end of course

As part of the normal processes involved in participating in the Communication Skills course, information will be gathered at the beginning and end of the course on participants' spoken proficiency and ability to accurately interpret socio-pragmatic aspects of workplace

talk, with a focus on requests and small talk (Riddiford 2007).

iii. Collect data from participants in workplace at start of placement

    The standard LWP methodology will be used for this, as described in (i) above

iv. Collect data from participant in workplace at end of placement

    The standard LWP methodology will be used as described in (i) above

C. Stage 3: Interview data

i. Discussion with course participants to establish whether, and if so to what extent, they feel that the course has met their needs, and to gather their reflections on what they have learned.

ii. Discussion with employers to establish whether, and if so to what extent, they feel that the course has met their needs and to gather their reflections on what they have learned.

iii. Discussion with workplace mentors to collect their views on the participants' progress in communicating effectively at work, and to gather their reflections on what they have learned. Their views will also be sought regarding any perceived changes in attitudes towards the course participant by other employees and the employer.

Discussion

The project outlined in this paper has three broad goals. Firstly, it aims to ensure that the migrants' explicitly expressed primary goal of acquiring socio-pragmatic competence in New Zealand ways of interacting is satisfactorily achieved. Migrants want to make sure they "fit in" to New Zealand workplaces so that they will be perceived as "good" employees who will continue to be offered employment. To this end, the migrants' sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic progress from embarkation on the course to ensconcement in their workplaces, as well as the attitudes and levels of satisfaction of their employers towards them will be tracked and evaluated.

Secondly, this project takes an empirical step in the direction of "critical needs analysis" (Benesch 1996; Pennycook 1999, 2001). As Benesch points out critical needs analysis

"assumes that institutions are hierarchical and that those at the bottom are often entitled to more power than they have. It seeks areas where greater equality might be achieved" (Benesch 1996: 736). Even well-educated, skilled professional migrants often find themselves near the bottom of workplace hierarchies, sometimes taking jobs well below their skill level. Seeking ways of empowering these people seems a very worthwhile enterprise for applied linguists.

To this end, the project aims to empower learners to make choices about the kind of identity they want to construct. The Workplace Communication Skills course provides analytical skills which enable migrants to select linguistic forms which enact an authoritative identity when required, and to be supportive, collaborative and collegial when they judge it appropriate.

The project's longer term goals also encompass research on empowering migrant workers from another perspective, namely by increasing the employers and co-workers "tolerability" and indeed appreciation of what is offered by those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The concept of tolerability has been developed most fully by May (2001, 2003) as a response to the challenge of convincing majority language speakers to accommodate to minority language rights. May (2000: 366):asserts that "majority language speakers in particular are often loath to make *any* accommodation to minority language rights, arguing that such rights infringe on their individual right to continue speaking the majority language in all contexts and language domains". The concept of tolerability can also be extended, however, to encompass attitudes towards the communicative norms of minority groups, including those to which migrant workers belong.

Socio-cultural, sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic differences are undoubtedly sources of potential miscommunication in New Zealand workplaces. They comprise areas of inter-group contrast that New Zealanders definitely orient to. New Zealand has a very high level of monolingualism (Starks 1998), and Pakeha people (of European origin) are often rather suspicious of those from different cultural backgrounds. People are highly sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences, frequently adopting a rather disapproving stance; in other words, there is little evidence of "tolerability" towards migrants and their interactional behaviours. There is clearly an opportunity for applied linguists to provide information which

might assist in changing attitudes so that migrants' linguistic and cultural resources are viewed more positively, as assets rather than drawbacks.

Many Pākehā are simply unaware of the stresses that people from different cultures face on a daily basis because of different expectations about "normal" ways of behaving at work, or about what is considered an acceptable way of communicating. Our research in Maori workplaces indicates that young Maori people working in Pakeha workplaces often used humour to diffuse some of the tensions which arise because of the insensitivity of their workmates to areas of cultural difference (Holmes and Hay 1997; Holmes and Marra 2002b). The situation of new migrants is particularly challenging since they are generally working in isolation from other members of their linguistic and cultural group. They have no obvious source of tension relief or camaraderie with others in the same minority situation. However, developing an understanding of the migrant's situation among co-workers could provide a starting point for humour and social talk which would contribute both to the development of camaraderie and to the empowerment of the migrant professional.

It may also be possible to draw for this purpose on the experience of co-workers and colleagues who have worked in different cultural contexts, perhaps overseas, and who have direct experience of what it feels like to be an outsider, or "other". Such people may be able to explain to others how it feels to be made constantly aware of areas of inexperience and ignorance (cf Campbell and Roberts 2007), and the discomfort of having one's taken-for-granted assumptions about normal ways of interacting challenged on a regular basis.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the approach we have developed to working with skilled migrants to prepare them for New Zealand workplaces. Rather than teaching them how to talk so as to make the fewest waves, and trying to make them fit into New Zealand workplaces, we have rather been concerned with assisting them to make their own choices about the kind of workplace identity they wish to construct. Drawing on material from employer interviews, together with the results of the Wellington LWP research, our Communications Skills course aims to develop migrants' socio-pragmatic proficiency as well as their abilities in analysing the socio-pragmatic dimensions of workplace talk. Reflecting the concerns of both employees and employers, the course consistently focuses on relational aspects of workplace interaction,

with issues of politeness and directness a central concern. The course aims to empower these professional people to select a style of interaction that they find comfortable while also enabling them to recognise how it will be interpreted by their interlocutors.

The paper has also outlined a research project aimed at further developing the "critical" component of our approach to assisting migrants into employment. The project will not only gather data on the effects of the Communication Skills course on migrants' socio-pragmatic proficiency and analytical abilities, it will also collect information on employer attitudes towards EAL users, and will provide information to assist employers and co-workers in understanding and even appreciating the distinctive socio-cultural backgrounds and different socio-pragmatic norms of migrant employees. This comprises another less direct means of empowering learners; increasing "tolerability" will potentially liberate migrants to exercise their expertise more fully.

This project will be the first of which we are aware to record authentic workplace talk in order to examine the effects for professional migrants of participation in a course which explicitly focuses on the development of socio-pragmatic and analytical skills in workplace interaction. It will also be the first to work with employers with the aim of raising their awareness of the positive attributes of migrant professional workplaces and of the ways in which the diverse cultural and linguistic resources they bring to a community of practice can enhance the quality of workplace interaction.

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Appendix

Interview questions for potential employers of skilled migrants.

Questions

1. What do you see as the advantages of employing a skilled migrant?
2. What might be the challenges involved in employing a skilled migrant?
3. What might be some reasons for not employing migrants?
4. Have you encountered people who have been unwilling to employ migrants? What kinds of comments did they make/ views they express?
5. In what areas would you expect a skilled migrant employee might need support in the workplace?
6. How important is the migrant's ability to relate well to colleagues both socially and in work related areas?
7. How important are communication skills?
8. How important do you consider a high level of English language skills to be?
9. Do you have any suggestions of areas that might be included in the course?

Notes

[i] This paper was presented in March 2008 at a Symposium ("New Directions for Applied Linguistics: Discourse Analysis in Applied Linguistics: what does the future hold?"), organised by Chris Candlin and Ron Carter at AAAL in Washington DC. We express our appreciation to our co-presenters and the audience who contributed to a valuable discussion of the issues raised in the paper. Some of the issues raised are further explored in Holmes et al. (fc).

[ii] But see Roberts and Sarangi (1995: 369) for a perceptive discussion of the options available to "dominated groups" based on Bourdieu's notion of the "game".

[iii] See Riddiford and Joe (2005), Newton (2007) and Prebble (2007).

[iv] See Marra (2003) for a detailed description.