New Zealand's Language in the

Workplace Project:

Workplace Communication for Skilled Migrants

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*Language in the Workplace
Occasional Papers No.11 (November 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

For many skilled migrants who come to New Zealand, finding employment which matches their qualifications and experience often proves difficult, with a perceived lack of English language proficiency creating a seemingly insurmountable hurdle. The much-needed expertise that they bring and their potential to make a considerable contribution to society is acknowledged and actively sought by the government. But speaking the majority language is viewed as a necessity for facilitating successful employment and settlement, and hence a key feature of the entry requirements is a reasonably high level of English proficiency (IELTS 6.5 or equivalent). Despite reaching this benchmark, professional migrants are frequently overlooked by prospective employers who continue to cite inadequate communication skills as a major obstacle (Podsialowski 2006, Spoonley and Davidson 2004, Henderson 2007). The exact level of English proficiency required for successful and satisfying employment continues to come under intense scrutiny (Couper 2002, Henderson, Trlin and Watts 2006).

In response to a recognised gap in workplace communication training in New Zealand, Victoria University of Wellington was contracted to develop and deliver a communication course for skilled migrants. The point of difference offered by the university was the corpus of naturally occurring workplace interactions recorded and analysed by Victoria's Language in the Workplace project (LWP) which has been investigating effective workplace communication for more than a decade. This material, based on the analysis of native speaker interactions, was available to be used for materials development as well as facilitating needs analysis. The result is a course which includes both classroom instruction and supported workplace internships, and one which places significant emphasis on sociopragmatic skills for the New Zealand workplace, moving beyond English proficiency to address social meaning in interaction.

Current research in ESP (and sociopragmatics more generally) recognises that, contrary to popular belief, migrants' communication problems can often be attributed to lack of understanding of culturally different communicative styles, and the attitudes of native speakers, rather than to a lack of English proficiency per se (Roberts 2005, Kasper 2006). Sociolinguists identify sociopragmatic aspects of workplace talk, including the subtle sociolinguistic nuances of communicative styles, as most demanding (Clyne 2004, Myles 2005). This analysis is borne out in interviews conducted with New Zealand employers who register concerns around migrants' interpersonal communication skills, especially for dealing

with senior professionals. All this supports initiatives which direct attention beyond a narrow range of contexts and/or tasks in isolation from real life contexts (the perceived shortcomings of ESP as summarised by Belcher (2004: 165)) towards classroom activities designed to develop wider sociopragmatic skills for learners.

In this chapter we report on the design of our course for skilled migrants and the related research which is evaluating its success. The difficulties faced by professional skilled migrants have not gone unnoticed; globalisation affects the labour market and migrants have many options. Understanding and addressing communication needs for the workplace is an imperative shared by the government, employers and migrants alike.

Victoria University's Workplace Communication for Skilled Migrants

Workplace Communication for Skilled Migrants is a programme of intensive communication skills training for underemployed or unemployed skilled migrants. The course is designed for permanent residents who have a Bachelors degree or higher and whose first language is not English. The participants all have relevant expertise in their chosen profession, but lack New Zealand cultural knowledge and experience which typically limits their employment opportunities. Meeting these criteria, the cohorts (roughly 12 members per course) include accountants, lawyers, judges, doctors, financial analysts, engineers etc with the majority originating in Hong Kong and China, and regular participants from Russia, Sri Lanka and India.

The data used for classroom instruction is drawn from the analysis of authentic data obtained from New Zealand workplaces as part of the LWP project at Victoria. LWP has been recording and analyzing workplace interactions since 1996, the majority of which occur in white-collar environments including government departments and large and small corporations (see Holmes and Stubbe 2003, and the project website for more information: www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/lwp). This data, drawn from more than twenty workplaces, and involving more than 500 participants, provides useful baseline data representing what occurs in a range of New Zealand workplaces, workplaces which correspond to the environments in which the participants in the workplace communication course aim to place themselves.

The diversity in the class, coupled with reasonably high levels of English proficiency, means that instruction cannot and should not be focused on specific tasks for specific positions. Instead our focus is sociopragmatic skills which serve as resources in a range of situations. Learners need to be able to manage on-going, dynamic social interaction in a wide range of settings, and this entails the ability to accurately analyse the relative weight of different social dimensions. Hence we explicitly encourage and teach tools for self-reflection and analysis of relevant contextual information. This analysis is crucial since the difficulties that skilled migrants often have with subtle sociopragmatic aspects of language can have significant consequences for their ability to engage in and participate fully in both the host community and a new workplace. As the two examples below demonstrate, skilled migrants enrolled in our course also identify these areas as having a considerable impact on the quality of their working lives:

Example 1:

So a lot of mistakes I made cos like I … just want to get the work done and ignore the social talk, the small talk. And work long hours, cos I want to pick up quickly so make myself always tired and I don't want to talk. [So I was] left out … Yes in like birthday parties or farewell parties um or happy hours, can't join in.

Example 2:

They are open but you sit down and I got nothing to say and the people they talk about their own topics so I can't [say anything]. So I really want to [but] what are they talking about? Actually I can say something but just no confidence to stand up and say. Yeah because what I can say is only short sentences - stop. Other people talking and then one sentence and stop. It's not like a conversation.

The need to attend to both transactional and relational aspects of talk also emerges from the analyses provided by Campbell and Roberts (2007). They discuss the challenge for skilled migrants in synthesising personal and professional discourse in culturally-appropriate ways in job interviews. However, even if a job is successfully secured, the challenge of 'doing collegiality' continues to be an important aspect of constructing an appropriate professional

identity. Contributing effectively at work involves "learning local ways of being sociable and local norms for managing small talk, humor and friendly chat", alongside managing the demands of more business-oriented talk (Holmes 2005: 345). Our course thus aims to provide pragmatic instruction which focuses on developing learners' abilities to notice and appreciate different communication patterns and styles within the host community, and especially within the workplace.

A significant feature is a commitment to theoretical, methodological and practical approaches which empower, rather than approaches which attempt to make people 'fit' (Eades 2004, Pennycook 2001), where the goal is inclusion in a receptive community rather than oppressive and uncritical moulding of "outsiders" to meet local norms. A particular challenge in the design of the course thus involves giving adequate weight to ways of empowering the migrant employees to undertake their own analyses of what is going on in workplace interactions (Byram 2006, Newton 2007). Or, as Clark and Ivanic (1997: 217) express it, "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" (see also Pennycook 2001: 12)

With these goals in mind, the authentic data and extensive analysis from the LWP corpus has been used to create materials which explicitly address aspects of sociopragmatic competence (Riddiford 2007, Newton 2007). Studies which have investigated whether specific target features are teachable, ie. whether instruction is more effective than exposure alone, and which type(s) of instruction are most effective, suggest that "without exception learners receiving instruction in pragmatics outperformed those who did not" (Kasper and Rose 2002: 256). In particular, since pragmatic aspects of language are generally not sufficiently salient to second language learners, instruction which focuses on developing sociopragmatic awareness or 'noticing' skills, has been found beneficial for learners' development of sociopragmatic competence (Rose 2005, Schmidt 1993,Takahashi 2005). Takahashi's (2001) study in particular found that learners provided with explicit metapragmatic instruction on request forms (i.e. noticing) outperformed learners in three comparison groups. Rose notes that even when pragmatic features which appear relatively resistant to learning are involved, "there is evidence that better results are produced with metapragmatic discussion than without" (Rose and Ng 2001 cited in Rose 2005). We can therefore conclude that pragmatic

aspects of language are not only teachable, but also that instruction is more beneficial than exposure alone and enhances learning through exposure (see also Bardovi-Harlig 2001, Kasper 1996).

Example 3 is a sample of how this works in practice. The exercise is based on an extract involving Tom and his manager Greg as he attempts to secure extra vacation time (as analysed in Holmes 2000). When creating these exercises, Nicky Riddiford, the course instructor has been careful to choose examples which are appropriate and relevant to learners, generalisable to some extent and suitable for classroom use; the extracts need to be short, without too many idioms or difficult vocabulary, where the context is clear, and where the examples represent a range of different situations. In the following example, there are many cumulative steps to encourage a rich and deep understanding of the material and associated contextual factors.

Example 3: Using authentic materials in the course

Step one: description of situation.
Tom and Greg work in a government department. Greg is Tom's boss. They have worked together for some time and know each other quite well. Tom wants to take Friday off and have a long weekend skiing. He goes to visit Greg.

Step two: complete the table

	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty of request			

Step three: role-play
A prompt for the role play conducted by the class in pairs.
- Tom: Can I have a quick word?
- Greg: Yeah, sure. Have a seat.

Step four: compare with transcript of native speakers in a New Zealand organization (the extract has had minor editing for ease of understanding)

1. Tom: Can I just have a quick word?
2. Greg: Yeah sure, have a seat.
3. Tom: (sitting down) Great weather, eh?
4. Greg: Mm
5. Tom: Yeah, been a good week.
6.   Did you get away skiing at the weekend?
7. Greg: Yeah we did – now how can I help you?
8. Tom: I was wondering if I could take Friday off
9.   and make it a long weekend.

Step five: reflect and compare

• Compare your conversation with the example. What differences did you notice?
• What words or phrases were used to make the conversation go smoothly?
• What phrase was used to make the request? Why do you think this phrase was chosen?
• What words or phrases were used to soften the request?
• Were pauses used? Why?
• How does the dialogue begin? Where in the conversation does the request come?
• How direct or polite was Tom?
• Would the conversation happen in the same way in your country?

Exercises like these, which raise awareness of the various aspects of contextual information which contribute to effective workplace interaction, operate as a discourse analytic technique which can be applied in a range of situations, primarily but not restricted to the workplace. Once the course members have practiced and developed tools in the classroom, it is important for them to be able to test their developing communication skills in authentic settings. To these ends, and somewhat unusually for communication courses, the course also includes a work placement to further develop participants' pragmatic competence. After five weeks of intensive classroom instruction, the class members spend six weeks in supported internships in a New Zealand organization matched to their area of interest. During this period the participants spend one afternoon per week back in the classroom to reflect on and discuss issues that have arisen, and after their internships return to the classroom for a final week of class time.

Throughout this process the interns have a mentor from within the organization as well as support from a consultant who liaises with the course teacher and the workplaces to mediate the interns' experience. We argue that this supportive environment plays a significant role in the success of the course and demonstrates the active commitment of the wider business community. (See Prebble (2007) for a description of a community business group which is committed to supporting the programme by providing mentors, conversation partners, and employment opportunities).

After four years and eight cohorts, we have begun research which evaluates the success of the course. To encapsulate the various aspects of the programme, including both the class instruction and the supported internships, we have developed a research design which tracks the progress of class members from the classroom into the workplace as described below.

Evaluating the success of the programme
After participating in the course, participants have achieved an astounding 70-80% success rate in finding fulfilling work in positions which more accurately reflect their professional expertise, and all report changed perceptions and increased confidence in their communication skills. The contribution of the communication course has also been acknowledged by government departments and the Settlement National Action Plan (SNAP) group, who include a long-term recommendation for nationwide implementation of the course in their latest discussion paper. For this to be in any way achievable, we need to understand the roots of this success.

To these ends we are undertaking systematic analysis of the participants' sociopragmatic development as they progress through the course and into the workplace. This evaluative research, assessing the participants' ability to make use of what they have learned in class when they enter a New Zealand workplace, represents a natural progression for the LWP team which has always focused on naturally-occurring interactions at work. The research also addresses the issue of the value of classroom instruction in developing sociopragmatic proficiency. As Master argues ESP needs to "heed the repeated calls to establish its empirical validity" (2005:111). The contribution of ESP programmes must be measured with evidence that goes beyond anecdotal success stories. Studies investigating the effectiveness of second language learning typically do not use learners' day-to-day, face to face interactions as a

measure of the success of teaching (Rose 2005 cites Billmyer 1990 as an exception), and especially not in their work environment. This research thus extends the ESP field in valuable ways using authentic talk as a basis both for teaching and assessment of the development of sociopragmatic skills, with the additional goal of enhancing future teaching resources.

The research tracks the development of the awareness and use of sociopragmatic aspects of talk at work by skilled migrants from their first lessons in the classroom through to their workplace internships. While it is still in an early phase, eight course members have been involved in the study to date. Their development is measured throughout the course and samples of their workplace interaction are recorded at different points during their internship. Reflective interviews are conducted with the course members, their employers, their colleagues, and their workplace supports in order to provide insights into attitudes towards, as well as responses to, the migrants' sociopragmatic performance in interaction. This provides an in-depth data set for each participant which will assist us to gain a thorough understanding of their competence and experience, and enable us to evaluate the extent to which the participants are constructing a satisfactory (to them) professional identity in their individual workplaces. The extensive data set (as described in the figure 1) includes measures designed to elicit indicators of sociopragmatic analytical ability, as well as indicators of knowledge and sociopragmatic skills.

Figure 1: Data collected for each research participant
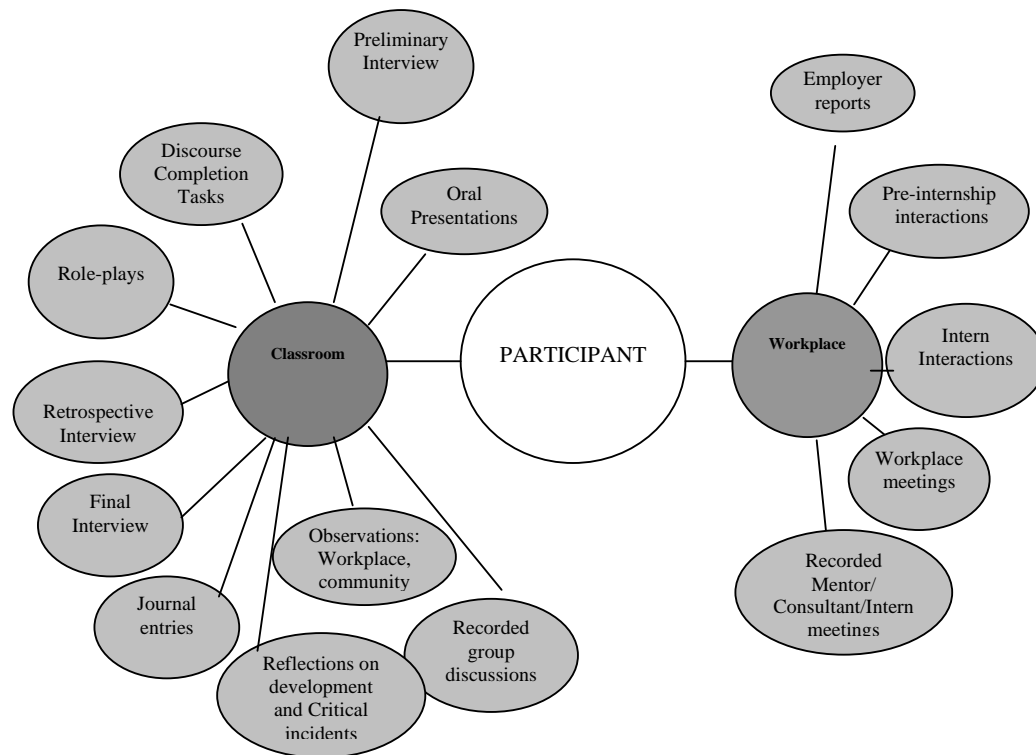
Research in the classroom has increasingly focused on multiple methods for accessing sociopragmatic competence, recognising that one method alone (eg role play or discourse completion task) cannot provide a full and accurate picture of a participant's skills (Riddiford 2007). Consequently, in this research we draw on a wide range of sources which enables us to triangulate findings and to track progress, from direct input to workplace experience. By combining the results of the analysis of these different components of participants' performance and experience, we are able to build a comprehensive picture of the communication issues faced by skilled migrants at work.

Preliminary research results have clearly demonstrated significant development in the sociopragmatic competence and awareness of the participants. To illustrate this, we have chosen an example from just one aspect of data collection from the classroom and related results from the workplace. Example 4 represents the progress made by one research participant, Helena, in dealing with the speech act of requests.

Example 4: Classroom data (Role play)

> An unexpected and urgent request from the CEO means that you will have to ask your secretary, Mrs Jenny Smith, to stay late tonight to help you prepare a report. You have worked with your secretary for three years. Ask your secretary if she can stay on at work for two extra hours. (In each case the secretary is played by a native speaker)

Week 1(start-point)

1. Helena: do you have plans tonight.
2. (Sec: yes)
3. Helena: oh okay, **so do you think you can work a little bit late tonight?**

Week 6 (mid-point; immediately before internship)

1. Helena: hi er, do you have any plans tonight
2. (Sec: yes but I need to be … at six thirty
3. Helena: …six thirty er look there's a [laughs] problem here
4. um CEO John he just gave me a call that he has a report
5. a really urgent report to get it done tonight
6. because he's going to meet his client tomorrow morning
7. so er actually the report um already get th- is the second draft
8. but just need to add some pictures and um the bibliography
9. **so I wonder if you could stay until six o'clock**

Week 14 (final-point; following internship)

1. Helena: hi Jenny
2. are you busy at the moment?
3. can I have a quick word?
4. I got a document from CEO and it is very urgent report
5. **I was wondering if you can stay a little bit late tonight** to help
6. to finish the report. … make sure …
7. thank you Jenny …

As indicated in bold, the form of Helena's request developed over the programme from *do you think you can* to the use of *I wonder* to *I was wondering*. It is also clear that her requests

became increasingly elaborate, and that she paid more attention to the face needs of her interlocutor over time. This is especially clear in the final week where she uses the name of her addressee as well as other hearer-oriented devices (lines 1, 2-3,7), and where she also explicitly recognizes the imposition she is making upon Jenny with an expression of appreciation *thank you* (line7)..

During her internship, Helena was naturally required to make many requests and below we provide two examples of her attempts to accomplish these appropriately in this authentic setting.

Example 5: Workplace data

Week 6-7 (first week of internship)

1.   Helena: **I ah I wonder** working in government sector like doing budgeting
2.   do you um the relevant I mean the other staff in
3.   also doing budgeting of their call centre
4.   do you all will have join together have some kind of call conference
5.   or seminar together?

Example 6: Workplace data

Week 11-12 (final week of internship)

1.   Helena: um **could you either … I was wondering if you could**
2.   you know forward this start list to me so I can see the details
3.   of those items and then I can enter into the c system
4.   cos I can't see what are they.

Again Helen's preferred phrase appears in these requests (line 1 in both examples), and there is further evidence of development within the internship from *I wonder* to *I was wondering*. While her conscious attention seems to have been directed to the appropriate form of the request, there is also evidence of greater sociopragmatic awareness in other features of her performance: in the final week, for example, she uses the pragmatic particle *you know* to soften the request (line 2), and provides a "grounder", (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989: 287), a simple and short explanation for why she needs the list (lines 2-4).

Comments from Helena herself describing her growing recognition of the importance of these pragmatic features support this interpretation.

Example 6:

> I want to get this information – get something done. I may say simply 'could you do this for me?', 'could you find it for me?' … but
>
> during the course I also observed what my teacher saying when *(she)* asked us to do something – the way is more politely and also very soft – the tone – so no matter how busy the work, don't give the hard feeling to people. So 'I wonder if you could' – that is the great wording – I use it all the time.

Although space has permitted discussion of only a small sample of the data we have collected and analysed, hopefully it has been sufficient to provide a useful indication of the potential value of this research in the ESP context. Long (2005) has persuasively argued for task as the fundamental unit of needs analysis, rather than linguistic units, notions or functions, on the basis that this provides a foundation for coherent syllabus design. Our LWP research makes a case for also paying attention to the social demands on new migrants in the workplace. Any thorough needs analysis of the language demands on professional workers in their work contexts will identify attention to the social dimensions of workplace interaction as crucial.

Our research highlights the importance of analysing the dynamics of social meaning creation in inter-cultural interaction. Triangulation through reflection and comment from a range of participants enhances the validity and richness of the interpretation, and also supports the involvement of all participants. Our research clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction for increasing learners' awareness of the forms and functions of sociopragmatic aspects of talk at work, and provides convincing evidence of participants' increasing use of contextually appropriate talk in line with their growing awareness.

Conclusion

Instruction and practice lead to knowledge, skills and understanding. This chapter has described the focus of teaching in an ESP course and related research into English for the Workplace for professional migrants in Wellington, New Zealand. The course focuses on empowering class participants by providing them with tools to analyse the ways in which social meaning is conveyed in different social contexts. They are encouraged to view

interaction as dynamic and negotiable, an approach which is empowering and which emphasises that every participant has the potential to make an important contribution in any interaction.

Finally, it is important to stress that improved participation in employment requires a two-way commitment between host and newcomers, a point explicitly noted in the country's Settlement Strategy (NZSS: 12). At a practical level, the support that they have received from their mentors, colleagues and employers contributes enormously to the level of success participants in the course have enjoyed in developing their sociopragmatic proficiency. Effective ESP research is crucially dependant on the goodwill of all participants, including the wider community to which their learners are inevitably oriented.

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