Education for Power:
English language in the workplace

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ABSTRACT Developed countries around the world are increasingly competing for highly skilled, educated immigrants. A case in point is Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). The NZ Immigration Service actively encourages skilled migrants, and around the country there are numerous English language programmes focussing on English for employment. The dominant focus of these programmes is on migrants' acquisition of correct, appropriate language form, with some attention to intercultural communication. In the view of the authors, this focus is reductionist and provides inadequate preparation for communication in the workplace. This article considers ambiguity and power relations in positioning and interpreting migrant employees in the workplace. Two sets of data are drawn upon. First, a workplace ethnography in a 'migrant friendly' NZ engineering office reveals a management culture that exercises the power of the dominant Anglo-Saxon population to control and exclude a Japanese migrant engineer. Second, a published analysis of immigrant employees' interactions is revisited in order to interrogate the interpretation of workplace texts and underlying discourses of 'appropriate' workplace language. The analysis traces implications for both formal and informal education, and the discussion raises larger questions of social justice concerning migrants.

Introduction

In this era of heightened international migration, advanced capitalist countries in North America, Europe and Oceania are increasingly in competition for highly skilled, educated immigrants to raise their population and economic growth (Li, P, 2007; Li, W, 2007; Castles & Miller, 2009). Yet in many of these countries such as Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), well-qualified immigrants often cannot find employment that builds on their skills, education, and experience, even in times of high employment and skills shortages. Reasons often cited for their difficulties include employer attitudes, devaluing of overseas qualifications, the need to have prior work experience in the host country and, at the forefront, a lack of English language proficiency (Reitz, 2001; Mirchandani, 2004; Thapa, 2004; Trlin et al, 2004; Henderson et al, 2006; Ng et al, 2007; Jackson & Slade, 2008).

In response to employer concerns about language proficiency, the New Zealand Immigration Service raised its English requirement so that skilled immigrant applicants must score at least 6.5 on the International English Language Testing System test (IELTS, 2009). Nevertheless, language proficiency continues to be expressed as a key issue among many employers of immigrants. For example, in the words of the managing director in an engineering firm (a participant in this research project), if 'they got a tertiary degree ... it could be a doctor or an engineer or any highly skilled person, they should have a rate of 10'. A score of 6 is labelled 'competent user', generally required for admission to undergraduate programmes in New Zealand universities. The top band

41 score on the IELTS is 9, 'expert user'. Moreover, as one teacher of advanced level employment
42 English put it, 'They're generally fluent and they think they're accurate. But they need work on
43 collocations, articles, tense, prepositions, vocabulary selection, appropriateness, and tone. Many are
44 resistant to English classes – they claim they have no needs, they're indignant, and they blame
45 discrimination'. Many skilled immigrants expect their English to be adequate as they fit into a set of
46 conditions: once they have found employment; once they feel confident in their work routine; and
47 once they become acclimatised to New Zealand (Kiwi) accents, especially if they've met the
48 government proficiency requirements.

49   What is salient in these two quotes is a construction of language narrowed to correct or
50 appropriate form, which is reflected in a number of policies, widespread practices, and assessment
51 schemes. One example is a recourse to the numerous published language teaching resources that
52 emphasise form in typified settings, as in, for instance, Hollett (1996); Jones and Alexander (2000);
53 Li (2000); Dignen and others (2004); Johnson (2006). Another is Ministry policy responding to
54 employers by giving mandates for language teaching and testing which frame the whole issue as
55 one of language form. In sum, language and literacy pedagogy is largely framed in terms of
56 measurable skills and competencies. It aims to equip individual language learners to communicate
57 correctly and appropriately beyond the classroom.

58   Similarly, culture is commonly seen as sets of fixed practices, beliefs and inherent binaries,
59 such as, collectivist/individualist or high power distance/low power distance (e.g. Hofstede's
60 cultural dimensions, 2001). Culture is then configured as sets of pedagogical rules to guide social
61 behaviour in intercultural communication, with accompanying rules for language use linked to
62 cultural styles, practices and situations. For example, customary workplace address forms in many
63 western English-speaking cultures often mean first names, for both management and employees.
64 The practice is seen to reflect the low power distance characteristic of those cultures.

65   We fear that such views of language and language proficiency promote reductionist, deficit
66 images of migrants that fail to account for the rich communication that takes place in workplaces
67 and the challenges that migrants face there. From linguistic anthropology, by contrast, there
68 emerges the more comprehensive notion of Total Linguistic Fact, encompassing *form*, but adding
69 *context*, *ideology* and *domain* (e.g. Wortham, 2008). Wortham maintains that analysis of all four
70 aspects of language use is essential to understand the meanings of language as it is used in social
71 practice.

72   From sociolinguistics and education, critics maintain that cultural characterisations lead to
73 'reductive and static understandings of culture ... either as attributes located in individuals or held
74 uniformly across entire groups' (Guttiérez & Correa-Chávez, 2006, p. 153). Guttiérez and Correa-
75 Chávez call for a focus on people's 'repertoires of practices ... [to] account for change, continuity
76 and multiple community memberships' (p. 157). Further, Anthony Liddicoat (2009) maintains that
77 culture adds an additional layer to the context of interactions, one that intrinsically shapes language
78 use and meaning. Liddicoat defines intercultural communication as 'continually mindful of the
79 multiple possibilities of interpretation resulting from the possible presence of multiple cultural
80 constructs, value systems and conceptual associations which inform the creation and interpretation
81 of messages' (2009, p. 131). In other words, these theorists hold a dynamic, complex and nuanced
82 view of culture, one that offers greater explanatory power in workplace interaction than simply
83 rules for cross-cultural encounters.

84   We take into account these elements in the analysis that follows, to present a more robust
85 picture of everyday workplace interactions involving immigrants than is possible by an analysis of
86 form alone. The discussion looks at the interpretation of workplace language extracts, especially in
87 connection with power-relations, to consider the issue of acceptance of migrant workers, along
88 with the role of applied linguists and vocational educators in analysing migrant employment.

89   In this article, we focus on interpreting workplace communication, to explore issues of
90 ambiguity and power in relation to migrants, tracing implications for formal and informal
91 education. Ambiguity arises in two ways: the possible meanings of workplace exchanges; and the
92 uncertain position of migrants who are variously directed, monitored and judged by local citizens.
93 First, drawing on an ethnographic study, the analysis concentrates on the dynamics around a skilled
94 migrant who occupies a vulnerable position in an engineering consulting company, subject to
95 arbitrary direction from the management. Second, it looks at the possible meanings of interactions
96 involving a selected group of migrants taking part in workplace experience, in the course of a

97 specialised programme preparing participants for employment. The workplace data are analysed
98 with reference to two forms of education: formal, institutional tertiary preparation of migrants for
99 employment; and informal, public information-sharing for the benefit of the community,
100 workplaces and the migrant, in processes that might be labelled 'civic education'. The whole
101 analysis raises questions of the exercise of power in work and society.

102 The article argues that workplace communication data are a valuable resource for educating
103 both migrants and the general populace about realities and uncertainties in employment. At the
104 same time, it recognises that a key element is how such data are interpreted. While we recognise
105 that the discussion below deals with a limited number of case-studies, we recommend the process
106 of inquiry as a means of engaging in in-depth analysis of the complex dynamics of workplaces. In
107 this way, we hope the exercise offers potential for analysis of other transcripts and extracts of
108 workplace communication.

109 The discussion draws on critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a main frame (**cf cf. MEANS**
110 **'COMPARED WITH'. DO YOU MEAN 'SEE'?** Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Van
111 Leeuwen, 2008). CDA typically focuses on the interaction of values and beliefs, the construction
112 and promotion of ideologies in society (especially dominant forms), power, and control. It proceeds
113 by problematising the ways in which social structure relates to discourse patterns, as seen, for
114 instance, in power relations and ideological effects (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25). Drawing on
115 Fairclough, Blommaert outlines three crucial phases of research analysis – *description*, *interpretation*
116 and *explanation*, in which the third element reveals ideological underpinnings of data (p. 30).

117 In this discussion, we take into account in particular, concepts of context, domain, ideology,
118 and power and positioning.

119 ### Context

120 In much of applied linguistics research, context is traditionally taken as co-text, context of situation
121 and of culture. But to a growing number of sociolinguists and literacy researchers, context is a
122 larger and more forceful entity (see for example, Gumperz, 1982, 1992; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992;
123 Maybin, 2000; Barton & Tusting, 2005; Blommaert, 2005). These writers maintain that context
124 includes identities and relationships, incorporating and going beyond the immediate situation to
125 the broader social and institutional structures that bear on communicative events. Context in this
126 view is vital to interpretation, for it shapes and is shaped by broader and local discourses.

127 In a critical discussion, Blommaert (2005, p. 251) glosses context as 'the totality of conditions
128 in which discourse is being produced, circulated, and interpreted', and further emphasises three
129 important related concepts. First, he draws on Gumperz' (1982, 1992) concept of contextualisation.
130 In interaction, people employ systems of verbal and non-verbal cues that link utterances with
131 contexts to facilitate interpretation of meanings. According to Gumperz, contextualisation cues
132 signal to interlocutors what speakers are doing in the interaction and where it is going, or as Auer
133 (1992) puts it, they 'orchestrate' the interpretation of speech events. Blommaert's second point is
134 that context is dialogical, that is, more than one interlocutor is always involved. Interactions,
135 however, are not always cooperative, as is usually assumed. Nor can we presume common ground
136 or shared understanding among participants in an exchange. Further, interlocutors often do not
137 share equal power or have access to the same range of linguistic resources in particular contexts.
138 Third, for Blommaert, context is 'translocal'; i.e. meanings of texts are carried over from other
139 contexts and are influenced by current and former contexts. Meanings shift as participants revisit
140 texts in new contexts. Interlocutors from different backgrounds bring to communication events the
141 meanings from other times and places as well as linguistic and semiotic repertoires from a great
142 range of contextualisation systems. These are all superimposed on interpretations of ongoing
143 communication, resulting in contingent, dynamic meanings as well as potential ambiguity.

144 Blommaert offers a nuanced view of context. His thesis acknowledges a certain dynamism in
145 everyday exchanges and implies that interaction does not always fit easily into idealised binary
146 categories of successful or unsuccessful, appropriate or inappropriate communication, as is
147 sometimes assumed in applied linguistics. His approach contrasts with the underlying assumptions
148 that meaning and interaction lie with the speaker/writer and that contexts are stable entities shared

149 by participants. What's more, it encompasses the potential for ambiguity in interaction, a feature
150 that in Scollon and Scollon's view occurs naturally and ubiquitously (2001).

Domain and Ideology

152 The concept of domain complements Blommaert's contextual translocality. In Wortham's (2008)
153 view, domains subsume the notion of macro/micro distinctions because they account for a wide
154 range of variability. Domains are ideologically loaded discourses of particular social groups. For
155 instance, a past prime minster of Canada, Jean Crétien, spoke fluent English with a heavy
156 Québécois accent, which helped maintain his identity and alignment with the minority
157 francophone population. His accent signalled the presence and power of French Canada in the
158 English-dominant national political domain. Domains may range from small local groups of people
159 to large communities with different ideologies. As speakers move through different contexts, they
160 encounter varying domains, where others' ideological models of language use may also vary. The
161 totality of domains that speakers encounter across time and space make up their individual
162 trajectories, which influence their relationships and potential success in school, work, and other
163 social contexts.

Power

165 Wortham (2008) acknowledges the approach of Blommaert and others in using language ideology
166 as a means of studying broader power relations. Mention of power then raises a number of key
167 points. Focusing on communication in organisations, Mumby (2001, p. 587) describes power as
168 structures of communication and meaning that support the interests of some members or groups
169 over others, which would suggest that power is embedded and enabled in certain contexts,
170 including workplace structures and sociocultural realities. It is however, unevenly distributed.
171 Fairclough reminds us, in a discussion of equality, that 'for persons to be able to contribute equally,
172 they must have equal status', but exchanges in which equity applies 'are by no means typical of
173 interactions in general' (1995, p. 47). It would follow then, that power is differential: one must first
174 have access to it, but even then, for instance in discussions or negotiations, participants may have
175 the power to speak up but may or may not prevail in decision-making. Access is all the more
176 important in the light of Van Dijk's argument (2008) that a significant aspect of power is control of
177 context, of discourse, and of people's minds. We could also note that power is exercised both
178 through action and lack of action (e.g. a manager declining to authorise surveillance of workers'
179 emails, or alternatively, refusing to institute a workload policy). In the exercise of power, language
180 (and para-language) are major players, expressing and enacting control, though obviously other
181 factors may apply as well (e.g. the relative wealth of certain shareholders in a company).

Positioning

183 Not only do interlocutors construct context as they interact in asymmetrical relationships; they
184 construct themselves and each other in relation to the contexts they call up. The concept of
185 positioning posits people as agents who act as well as react in dynamic interactions. Positioning
186 'can be used as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role' (Harre & Van Langenhove,
187 1991, p. 393), a notion that one can interpret as allowing for fluidity and flexibility in social action,
188 along with the idea of multiple selves and identities within interactions. In this vein, Davies &
189 Harre (1990, p. 46) talk of individuals as 'constituted and reconstituted through the various
190 discursive practices in which they participate'. Positioning, says Bamberg (2004, p. 445), allows
191 researchers 'to explore how humans make sense of themselves and construct their (and others')
192 identities'. Bearing in mind a warning from Benwell & Stokoe (2006, p. 140) that 'positioning
193 theory remains unclear', we attempt to make sense and use of it as an additional tool in the analysis
194 of workplace transcripts below.
195   In the following two sections, we interpret the contextualised meanings of two workplace
196 data-sets involving migrants, taking into account: linguistic form and appropriateness; ideology and
197 the relative power of the participants; trajectories across contexts; and the concept of positioning as

198 a means of re-constructing the dialogue. The first, *Work Allocation*, illustrates the uneven dynamics
199 of work and society relating to a migrant who is subject to the hierarchical direction of a line-
200 manager. The second, *Work Illocution*, explores the situation of migrants on work experience, as
201 part of a university course of preparation for employment. The two sets of data reveal
202 complementary aspects of migrant work placement, with significant implications for both formal
203 and civic education. Both data sets were parts of research projects approved by New Zealand
204 university research ethics committees. All names are pseudonyms.

Work Allocation

206 Hiroko, a young Japanese structural engineer, was part of a critical, interpretive interview and
207 ethnographic study of tertiary-educated immigrant employees dealing with the language, literacy
208 and communication demands they faced on the job. Hiroko worked in EC, an Australasian
209 engineering consulting company in a large metropolitan area, as an AutoCAD technician.
210 Employees had a diverse range of ethnicities, although most managers appeared to be white males.
211 At the start of the research, Hiroko had been employed at EC for slightly more than a year. Hiroko
212 interacted hesitantly in situations outside of everyday work routines and at times seemed to have
213 difficulty comprehending. Despite her English language limitations, Hiroko's skills, education and
214 work experience marked her as one of the 'talented' immigrants coveted by government and
215 business. She had an undergraduate degree in architecture and several years' experience working as
216 a structural engineer in Tokyo. She had reason to believe she might be valued in her work.

217 The company was concerned over Hiroko's lack of progress in English, given that she had
218 been working in an English-speaking environment for a year. Thus when approached with a
219 research proposal and an offer of language tutoring afterward, they agreed. One researcher 'job
220 shadowed' Hiroko one morning a week over four months; that is, sat with her at her work station
221 and accompanied her when she moved around the workplace. As well, the researcher interviewed
222 her previous and current supervisors and her department head.

223 Hiroko's work involved using the AutoCAD programme to create professional project
224 drawings, usually from hand-made sketches. Work was assigned to her by Carl, the AutoCAD
225 supervisor, or informally passed to her by individual engineers. During the study, Carl, a New
226 Zealand English-speaker in his forties, instructed her that he alone was to give her work, so that he
227 could organise the distribution and timing of assignments. The move exacerbated existing tensions
228 between them, for previously Hiroko accepted work from engineers when she had little to do,
229 which meant she had social contact with others, who were also engineers. But Carl was also seen as
230 a 'grumpy guy' (a comment overheard in the staff cafeteria). He seldom spoke to Hiroko, and
231 sometimes approached her work station quietly, leaned over the partition observing her until
232 either she noticed him or he spoke, which Hiroko resented. Carl was aware of the tensions around
233 his work allocation instructions. As he said in an individual interview:

> She has a little trouble with that and I think that comes out of the fact that she's an engineer and
> I'm just a draughtsperson. I have encountered that before with other cultures; she has to accept
> that I am her boss and I'm not going to be too overbearing about that but she has to understand
> that. If I say something, if I say, 'Don't do that but do that job first', it is how it's going to get
> done … we pay her salary; it comes from this company not from Japan; she has to realise that.
> This is the way we work.

240 In this work context the following conversation occurred, in which Hiroko presented a completed
241 drawing and requested more work from Carl.

Extract: Work Allocation

(/ / = overlapping speech)

1. H: I finished the job. So can I do something?

2. C: You finished all the work?

3. H: Um, yes. [unintelligible] from Gregory I haven't get yet. I don't know what should I do.

4. C: You just can see him; if he wants us to work for him he should be ready.

257

5. H: Yes, but /I haven't /

6. C: /chase him/

7. H: So I'm just waiting.

8. C: No, go and see him.

9. H: I did many times.

10. C: Have you?

11. H: Yes.

12. C: Have you left a note on his desk?

13. H: I talked to him many times.

14. C: What's wrong with him? If he wants us to do the work why doesn't he give it to us?

15. H: Please don't ask me. [*laughter*]

16. C: Well we have a process here where people want work we do it properly. We can't do that if they don't co-operate with us. Do you want me to talk to him?

17. H: No, no I've talked with him and he said he needed to talk with his client or something.

18. C: I don't know Gregory always seems to be making mystery out of things ...

19. H: Another one [unintelligible] with water but it is also…

20. C: It isn't ready?

21. H: Yes.

22. C: In the future when they do that make sure they give you the details of the job, their name and make sure they follow it up because what will happen we will get busy again and then they want. If they're going to give us work they should be timing it

23. H: But first you talk to them? [unintelligible] so you give to me?

24. C: No, there's nothing happened. I had a request and I asked you to see him, but all he's done ever since, you know, I mean the job is now a day old and he will come grumbling over and want it immediately. So he's got to co-operate [unintelligible] and that's not very good.

25. H: Um, Yes?

26. C: It's not your fault. I'm just saying we need to make sure that they are, if they want work they should follow it up.

27. H: So I don't need to chase him I think.

28. C: No need to chase him. Just leave a note on his desk saying, 'Look, we're ready. What is the problem?'

29. H: So?

30. C: OK. Well just follow it up. That is all I can say.

31. H: Umhm. So now I don't know what to do.

32. C: Yep. There will be some jobs coming in this afternoon.

33. H: This afternoon? Now you don't have for me?

34. C: Not immediately. This happens all the time. Just check with Peter again because he did have some work yesterday.

Work Allocation begins with what appeared to be a simple request by Hiroko for a new project to work on, but quickly became a lengthy and shifting negotiation. Issues of power and control, resistance, ambiguous contextualisation signals, differing recontextualisations of prior events around work tasks and complex positioning were interwoven in this interaction. As a socially

embedded text, it shows how meanings are less than straightforward, particularly in hierarchical interactions of the workplace.

Given Hiroko's hesitancy in English, often simplified grammar, and frequent difficulties with aural comprehension, she seemed to be a surprisingly competent, assertive communicator in this text. She positions herself in three ways: as an enthusiastic worker, keenly purposeful and focused on arranging new work tasks. She initiated the discussion, establishing the work as central, introducing no other topics. Most likely in deference to Carl's explicit direction to accept work only though him, she positioned Carl as the key to new assignments. The opening request in line 1, *So can I do something?* was followed by repeated appeals for work (3, 23, 31, 33). She resisted Carl's persistent requests that she 'chase' Gregory or leave notes for him, and she did not engage or acquiesce to his dictation of the wording of the note (27-28). At the same time, she repeatedly signalled awareness and fulfilment of a responsible work approach by reminding Carl that she had followed up Gregory's project (9, 11, 13, 17). Finally she brought the conversation around at the end to repeat her own request for more work.

At times in this conversation, Hiroko came across as more than assertive; her tone seemed almost abrupt. Her frequent use of the contextualization cue *so* (1, 7, 22, 26, 28, 30), as a sequence and turn initiator, may have contributed to this effect. Bolden (2009, p. 982) describes the interactional use of this contextual marker:

> When a course of action has been interrupted or subverted in some way before coming to a possible completion, the turn that invokes the relevancy of this incomplete course of action is commonly prefaced with 'so'. In other words, the discourse marker is, again, used with TCUs [turn constructional units] that pursue some pending interactional agenda.

In other words, Hiroko's use of *so* facilitated her persistence in focusing the interaction on her initial concern for new project work, while Carl shifted to directives about dealing with Gregory and then to advice about dealing with the company engineers. However, other factors may have been at play in Hiroko's *so*. The Japanese equivalent is typically used to cue offers or confirmation (Maho Umegaki, personal communication, May 27, 2009). This interpretation suggests Hiroko may have been attempting to show deference to Carl, which would align with her reference to the work allocation rule (23). While Hiroko's utterances may be ambiguous, Carl's interpretation would most likely be that she was being assertive rather than deferential, an interpretation more likely to confirm his view that she didn't accept his status and control.

Carl shifted strategies and positioning while playing out his role of supervisor. Throughout the conversation, Carl directed Hiroko to 'go and see' Gregory (8), then to leave a note on his desk (12, 28) so that she could complete Gregory's project. Subsequently he attributed blame to Gregory for not following proper work procedures (14, 18, and 24). In 16 he generalised the blame to the company engineers, and in doing so, positioned himself and Hiroko together as AutoCAD technicians compromised by the engineers' lack of procedure, notably by his frequent use of *we* and *they* (16, 22, 26, 30). In doing so, he also positioned himself as Hiroko's mentor as a technician, guiding her in how to deal with the recalcitrant engineers who had caused the problem. At the same time, he appeared to equivocate in his application of the work allocation rule, acknowledging Hiroko's role in directly negotiating the work (22, 23).

As we have seen, *Work Allocation* is a more complex interaction than a simple request for more work. It was shaped by the existing relationships between Carl and Hiroko and by the work conditions that involved Hiroko as an underemployed Asian woman in a largely male-dominant English-speaking environment. But it was also shaped by the participants, as Hiroko persistently positioned herself as a polite, compliant, keen worker, while Carl persistently positioned himself as her supervisor, to direct as well as remind her of her role and status as a technician. In the end, the work allocation rule, which had played an important part in the work context, seemed to be ambiguously subverted by Carl himself. Hiroko left the conversation without a clear project, direction, or sense of autonomy.

The interpretation of this interaction can vary depending on the frame in which it is viewed. If seen simply as two workers conferring, Hiroko appears to be keen to schedule her work timetable, while Carl comes across as an empathetic or understanding colleague – he recognizes the difficulties caused by clients who don't deliver. However, if seen as an exercise in power-relations, Carl appears less empathetic than protective of his ability to direct Hiroko. He gives blunt

345 directives, demands elaboration or challenges Hiroko's reporting, then refrains from resolving the
346 dilemmas Hiroko faces over how to proceed. Whether he recognises it or not, Carl leaves Hiroko
347 conflicted about approaching others.
348 From the point of view of taking the work context into account, both employees implicitly
349 accept the management hierarchy. But Hiroko consistently displays a certain agency, within the
350 limits of her second language, with little reciprocal encouragement from Carl. He gives no
351 indication that the current incident looks like an embedded, continuing problem, and therefore
352 needs an institutional response, both for smooth work-flow and for addressing Hiroko's
353 indeterminate status in taking on tasks. If there are alternatives to the status quo, the exchange
354 doesn't seem to prompt a new direction or a search for different procedures. Carl might, in other
355 words, display some agency support.

356 **Issues in Work Allocation**

357 Several interlocking elements characterise *Work Allocation*, specifically, language context, multiple
358 domains, power and ideology. The domains underpinning Hiroko's story include often-conflicting
359 attitudes toward immigrant employees on the part of government and society and the labour
360 market. While government and business need educated, skilled transnational workers, employers
361 on the ground may see them as an unknown risk, often because of stereotyped linguistic and
362 cultural characterisations (Hunter, 2007). Hiroko is a young female migrant to a relatively
363 unsympathetic, ethnocentric country that has been poorly prepared for the influx of immigrants it
364 has encouraged to relocate over the last two decades (**cf cf. MEANS 'COMPARED WITH'. DO
365 YOU MEAN 'SEE'?** Trlin et al, 2004; McMillan, 2005). Despite impressive degree qualifications and
366 professional experience, it was not easy for Hiroko to gain employment, and the work she got was
367 somewhat below the demands she faced in her work-life in Japan. She therefore faces barriers of
368 professional acceptance, work challenge and fulfilment, workplace culture, language,
369 marginalisation and alienation (see Watts & Trlin, 2005).
370 Hiroko's relationship with the supervisor brings additional factors into her work-life, as
371 evidenced in numerous exchanges and reflections from both parties throughout the ethnography.
372 The transcript above came with a history of awkward interactions with Carl, marked by the
373 unhelpfulness of the exchange, and posing the question of why things had to be that way. In
374 general, Carl ascribes Hiroko's inconsistent responses to his direction in terms of cultural
375 difference. He interprets Hiroko's behaviour as driven by what he sees as the fixed hierarchies of
376 Asian cultures – she is the more highly educated. At the same time, he asserts his position as
377 supervisor and her role as subordinate. One might interpret that Carl enjoys the tacit contextual
378 support of Kiwi white males, able to exercise the power of their own dominant ethnic group over
379 immigrants in a male-oriented society, without expending empathy on gender questions or
380 overseas work experience. The unbalanced cross-cultural environment advantages Carl, providing
381 a platform for him to act in an overtly antagonistic or unsupportive way. He adopts a strategy for
382 'mentoring' Hiroko, as a fellow technician, ignoring her background as an engineer and 'othering'
383 the engineers as uncooperative. Overall, Carl's message seems to be, *know your place*. Carl is telling
384 the young female migrant that he isn't going to help her much, except to conform to the identity
385 he constructs for her. Hiroko's persistence in challenging the direction of the discussion, through
386 her perhaps inadvertent use of '*So?*' may have ironically contributed to the forcefulness of Carl's
387 message.

388 **Work Illocution**

389 We now turn to office interactions where the interpretation of relevant sociopragmatics suggests
390 other deficit labelling, even though that construction is intended to help migrants to fit into
391 society's norms. In 'Talk at Work: interactional challenges for immigrants', Holmes and Riddiford
392 (2009) explore the process of migrants to New Zealand constructing a professional identity while
393 relating to mentors and colleagues during internships in the workplace. The authors analyse the
394 interaction between Helena (an accountant from Hong Kong) and her NZ colleague, Edward.
395 They contrast this relationship with exchanges between Andrei (a senior public relations advisor

from Russia) and Camille, his supervisor and colleague in NZ. In general, they find Helena much more sensitive and light of touch than Andrei, who they see as boastful and commanding, especially when he recounts his previous high work position in Russia in a rather embarrassing way.

Making decisions about the identity of migrants and the signals they communicate poses questions about interpretation of the workers' language and behaviour and, in particular for analysts, the information taken into account to arrive at those decisions. Such information includes: relevant context, potentially therefore the workplace; work roles; work cultures; personnel; surrounding cultures; ideologies and practices of the wider society; home cultures of the migrant; gender; ethnicity; and social class. Some of these dimensions feature in our discussion below, which is a search for an appropriate frame for interpreting the kinds of interactions reported.

In the excerpt below, from Holmes and Riddiford (2009), context may be all-important. It is Andrei's first day on the job, so the participants in the exchange are presumably meeting each other for the first time.

Excerpt Dunedin (p. 225)

Context: Andrei is being introduced to people (office staff, Con and Camille) on his first day of work. He has just informed them that he did a one-year diploma course at the University of Otago in Dunedin.

1 Con my family's down in Dunedin

2 it's a lovely //place I lived there for a while\

3 And /oh so really I know I know I know\\all Dunedin

4 Cam mm//[laughs]\ //[*laughs*]\\

5 And /it's a very small place [*laughs*]\\

6 Con /it is its got character though\\

7 And it's become er just ( ) city when I- er when

8 students are gone

9 Con oh yeah I know I was in the fire service down there

One might read this excerpt in different ways. By one scenario, Andrei launches on his boasting, claiming to 'know all Dunedin' (line 3), belittling the city by claiming 'it's a very small place' (line 5), and somehow diminishing it because of changes once students leave it (lines 7 and 8). An alternative scenario considers a context in which the participants face several unsettling divides: they're meeting each other for the first time, they come from two fairly different cultures, and Andrei is using a second language. The conversation therefore is a bit awkward, with the participants searching for appropriate expressions to cope with the social situation. By this reading, in line 3, Andrei picks up on Con's opening salvo about Dunedin as a lovely place, and reinforces the sentiment: 'I know \\ all Dunedin' – in other words, the whole of Dunedin is lovely. It's not hard for Andrei to come to this conclusion, because it's 'very small'. He wraps up his part of this short exchange by suggesting that the city somehow changes when the students leave this university town (lines 7 and 8). Meanwhile, Con enables the conversation in positive and supportive ways, showing his connection to the city that Andrei has recently exited, displaying affection for it, and suggesting it has character. Putting these moves together, the two speakers seem to play off constructively, even warmly to each other's leads, bridging to some extent the uneasiness people feel in such situations of first encounter. They've each tried, in other words, to be inclusive.

By contrast, Holmes and Riddiford position Andrei as having committed a 'faux pas', seen as presenting an image that is critical, negative and self-promoting (his remarks hinting that he has lived in much larger cities than Dunedin).

As mentioned above, one of the conversations is the site for Andrei to parade his previous prestigious position.

Excerpt (p. 220)

Context: Informal office interaction in the first two weeks of Andrei's internship. Camille and Andrei are discussing the parameters of Andrei's job in the organisation.

1 And I er [*clears throat*] I was involved in the same

2 similar to the similar similar **REPETITION OF 'SIMILAR' OK?** work back in Russia

3 Cam oh right

4 And er but for international er financial er institutions

5 like international monetary fund //and the world bank

6 Cam /oh wow\\

7 And and the European bank for construction and development

8 Cam oh

9 And and for our ( ) of ch- chairman and deputy chairman

10 and deputy director of some of the departments

11 were [XXX] departments not just [XXX] //but\

Andrei pretty much takes over the conversation, with Camille reduced almost to a bystander. The focus in this part of the interaction doesn't yet address Andrei's job as an intern in the NZ organisation, because Andrei is intent on describing his important role back in Russia.

Holmes and Riddiford comment that the first two lines are enough information for Andrei to make his point. New Zealanders, they note, tend to play down expertise, so Andrei is speaking out of place with his confident, assertive and 'unacceptable boasting'. By contrast, the New Zealand norm is for modest and self-deprecating presentation.

Andrei's outspoken self-promoting is then contrasted with the other intern, Helena, recorded early in her time in the organisation.

Excerpt (p. 222)

Context: Informal office interaction in the first two weeks of Helena's internship.

Edward and Helena are discussing the issue of assessment standards.

1 Edw that's another grey area that we have to solve

2 Hel always //yeah\

3 Edw /yeah\\

4 Hel I know always got problem like this

5 when the time was I work in hong kong

6 you know we have we used th- the standards

7 Edw yes

8 Hel the hong kong standards but when I touched

9?? when we touched th- the account in China + as

10 Edw different

11 Hel different and how did they never listen

12 //they never listened\ [*laughs*]

13 Edw /[laughs]\\

One can argue that Helena is rather more adept than Andrei in recounting her own previous employment experience at home. In this scenario, her tone is milder, less insistent, with a lighter touch, which lifts the mood in the last few lines of the exchange. This is indeed how Holmes and Riddiford see her remarks. Sociopragmatically, they decide, she has the right approach in inserting her claim to relevant experience. By their interpretation, she is appropriately modest and indirect, conforming to New Zealand norms of self-deprecation, subtlety and modesty.

490   Overall in their summary discussion, Holmes and Riddiford position the two migrants in
491 contrasting ways. They conclude that Andrei's approach is often too explicit and unacceptably self-
492 promotional. His talk, they decide, is too blunt and overt for cultural norms in the workplace. By
493 contrast, Helena is culturally acceptable by New Zealand organisational norms. In the light of their
494 analysis, they advocate a two-way process of informing both migrants and locals of differing
495 cultural norms and expectations.

496   **Reconsidering** *Talk at Work*

497 The process of considering different contexts of the interactions can suggest differing
498 interpretations of the data. Culturally speaking, migrants are caught in something of a Catch-22.
499 They know that various sectors of New Zealand society do not welcome them warmly and are
500 reluctant to offer employment. Institutionally and individually, migrants' prior experiences are
501 undervalued, treated with suspicion, ignored or demeaned (Watts & Trlin, 2005). Hence, when
502 given a chance, migrants may understandably talk-up their previous work, in order to try to set up
503 future employment (in Holmes and Riddiford's terms, 'conveying the fact that they have extensive
504 expertise and experience' [p. 217]). In this sense, both Andrei and Helena are doing much the same
505 thing in their internship, though perhaps with differing degrees of subtlety. In an important way,
506 they've read the society around them and are promoting their own cause.

507   The migrants' course experience can readily reinforce the above point. Typically, in English
508 language courses for the workplace, the picture of mainstream values of modesty and self-
509 deprecation tends to get less play than very direct preparation for hiring and employment. Such
510 preparation often explicitly teaches learners to promote themselves vigorously, both in writing
511 their CVs and in interviews. ('What are your key points of difference?' 'What gives you the edge?'
512 'What are you especially good at?'). The message is clear: shrinking violets lose out. So Andrei and
513 Helena are arguably both acting out the content and context of their courses. Critically, this
514 internal contradiction highlights the importance of context and intent.

515   An area related to the above two points concerns 'New Zealand's egalitarian ethos in the
516 workplace,' (p. 217), as identified by Holmes and Riddiford, and reinforced in much popular
517 discourse. The paradox is that the original chapter includes an array of *non*-egalitarian practices as
518 noted above (e.g. calling on newcomers to act as subservient, deferential subordinates who know
519 their place). One could argue that Holmes and Riddiford are entirely right to point out these
520 unequal practices, because they are rooted in long-standing NZ conventions, heard in expressions
521 like, 'Who do they think they are?' What's more, those practices are consistent with current neo-
522 liberal hierarchical structures in workplace institutions (Kelsey, 1995; Jesson, 1999). But at the same
523 time, such unequal practices contradict the notion of an egalitarian ethos.

524   The question then arises of deficit models of interpretation – the danger of blaming migrants
525 for not knowing or observing enough of society's practices. By this rubric, if migrants don't
526 demonstrate that they can 'do as the Romans do', they're in deficit. Presumably the pragmatic
527 message to migrants is that they should adjust their behaviour to fit in inconspicuously by
528 performing as much like Kiwis as they can. To the extent that they don't, they can be positioned as
529 not just deficient but 'marked', because they stand out as breaking the local society's norms. So in
530 the current study, by this paradigm, Andrei in particular, does not conform to accepted social
531 behaviour – he doesn't know his place.

532   Within applied linguistics, especially second language teaching, there is a tendency for the
533 discipline to define itself implicitly as dealing with deficits. Language learners, for instance, are
534 constantly conceived of as lacking – they lack language. Hence, needs analysis sets out to discover
535 what's missing. Highly-placed education administrators readily label **ESOL** **PLEASE WRITE IN**
536 **FULL IN FIRST INSTANCE FOLLOWED BY (ESOL)** 'remedial' rather than, say, 'creative',
537 'constructive', or 'developmental' – the acquisition of bilingual abilities. Teachers and test markers
538 have for decades concentrated on error, while overlooking evidence of creative language
539 development.

540   It may well be that Kiwi employers and staff would complain that Andrei's behaviour is
541 inappropriate. But not necessarily all would do so, because some 'aggressive' companies might in
542 fact welcome a forceful, outgoing, even brash employee like Andrei. In any case, it underlines the

point that if it is important to educate migrants about NZ customs and office protocols, it is just as urgent to educate the NZ populace, employers and workforce about the situation of migrants (the 'two-way street' identified above). Therein lies a challenging task.

But the issue of the exchanges around Andrei and Helena points to the problem of interpretation. The case above is that there are possible competing views of workplace communication. If that applies, then formal tertiary workplace preparation could usefully explore different interpretations with migrants, to consider meaning and response. Just as importantly, it could be valuable for educators, applied linguists, and administrators to problematise their reaction to extracts such as these studied, in particular to question concepts of dominant social attitudes and ideologies. An integral feature of mainstream values and beliefs is that they set up a frame of relations that enables a dominant group (e.g. local Kiwis) to exercise power over others (migrants). Hence, the local population can unconsciously or deliberately invoke their own accustomed cultural patterns of behaviour, and blame or exclude those who don't conform. A critical formal education would challenge these behaviours.

Activities of this kind would then also set the scene for civic education, to raise questions of accepted social values and beliefs, expectations of migrants and workers, the assumptions of employers and probably co-workers, patterns that position migrant workers, and issues of power. These are all matters that could be introduced to the general populace, but especially employers, media, community groups, government agencies, NGOs, and other entities that have dealings with migrants.

Conclusion

The two data sets offer complementary information for both formal and civic education. The work-experience migrants are in the midst of communication cross-currents that are debatable and possibly contradictory. As such, they offer critical opportunities for exploring meaning. Hiroko's situation offers a window onto employment practices where uneven patterns of power apply (scarcely an unusual condition in workplaces, it must be said). Tertiary courses preparing migrants for the workplace can do justice to Hiroko's experience by exploring the dynamics of the power-relations at work. They can consider how to interpret her situation and workplace dynamics of different kinds, taking into account the work context of line-management, the relations with co-workers, the social context of ethnic relations. In consequence, they can ask necessary questions around how to respond, what language is appropriate, how to position oneself.

Both data sets suggest that migrants can easily be positioned in ambiguous and vulnerable ways. Hiroko is left blocked from easy access to her next tasks, but liable to be blamed if she exercises initiative. The migrants on work experience are caught in a squeeze between their own cultural patterns, the conventions of the new country, the urge to please, the urgency of getting work, the challenge of accurately interpreting the communication they are part of, and the unforgiving ease with which they can be criticised and sidelined by the host population.

Hence there are opportunities for civic education and information sharing in the community. Both sets of data could be the basis for professional development in the workplace, involving workers and/or management. The challenge for both formal and civic education would be to scrutinise the work-relations and explore possible interpretations. An exercise of this kind could then usher in ways of responding in the workplace or society in general. Such action would be consistent with procedures of critical discourse analysis that take into account moral and political evaluation, in order to have an effect on society (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25). Blommaert cites 'empowering the powerless', and active intervention in social practices analysed (p. 25), as outcomes of CDA.

The data considered here offer evidence of deficit framing. The contradictory tensions in the studies suggest that there are questions of social justice to confront, not just in the employment of migrants but in the *interpretation* of migrants in workplaces – in short, a challenge to consider notions of equity in framing the construction of migrants at work. Such an outlook calls for applied linguists to inquire critically into the situation of migrant employees, taking context and domains carefully into account. It also raises the question of being prepared to take on a role of social advocacy.

596   One immediate issue of social justice arises from deficit labelling. Part of our point is the
597 paradox of a nation admitting migrants to the country, mounting informative employment-focused
598 courses, providing employment (albeit rather stingily), but throughout constructing the migrants
599 as deficient. Irritating though it may be to face social behaviour that differs from the local norm,
600 the unsettling thought is that those of us with the opportunity to distance ourselves from the day-
601 to-day reality of migrant employment, may actually work within our own deficient frame. Hence
602 the call to widen the contexts considered in interpreting workplace interactions.

603   To continue the paradox, we nevertheless see a role for applied linguists informing others of
604 the complications, constraints and contradictions of life in a new country. The opportunity arises
605 constantly through the mass media. Talk-back radio conversations, for instance, can easily become
606 one-sided and misleading, with unchallenged generalisations passing as received wisdom: 'They
607 [migrant workers] just use their own lingo with each other' (i.e. they cut others out); 'They should
608 perfect their English before they get a job'; 'They create their own ghettos'. But of course there are
609 more systematic ways of contributing informed analyses through publications, web-sites, blogs,
610 social media and outlets ranging across social commentary, business and employment magazines
611 and journals, and discussions of public policy. In other words, there are opportunities for applied
612 linguists in civic education. Further, in the language teaching field, one important activity is to
613 move beyond the necessary form of language presented in often overly simple materials for English
614 as an additional language, to capture the kinds of contexts and complications that can characterise
615 workplace conversations, as evidenced in these two data sets.

616   Academics and professionals who work closely with migrants could well explore ways of
617 contributing usefully to the construction of social policies on immigration, settlement and
618 employment, along with promoting progressive social education programmes on the presence of
619 migrants in society. A particularly challenging task is to find ways of informing and educating
620 employers about the kinds of complexities discussed in this paper. All these possibilities involve
621 expanded concepts of language and communication, to underpin educational approaches and social
622 advocacy.

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