Relational talk at work: 

from the workplace to the classroom and back again

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for the LWP team

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To date we have recorded more than 1500 interactions involving approx 500 participants in 22 different workplaces.
Analysis

Management style
Directives & Requests
Workplace culture
Humour and Small talk
Meetings and Decisions
Narrative
Problem solving
Leadership and Mentoring
Cross-cultural pragmatics
Miscommunication
Gender and Ethnicity
Power and Politeness
What do New Zealand employers say?

“employers 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?”

Or alternatively too direct?

*From an interview with a manager in a recruitment company*
The importance of sociopragmatic skills
Requests

“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”

An employment consultant and retired manager comments on interpersonal skills required
Overview
A programme of intensive communication skills training for underemployed or unemployed skilled migrants.

Goals
• to develop appropriate communication skills in professional workplaces
• to improve cultural understanding of New Zealand workplaces
• to gain New Zealand work experience


Course Coordinator
Nicky Riddiford
Course Structure

• full time

• 5 weeks: guided communication skills practice in the classroom:
  units on a range of aspects of relational talk e.g., small talk, requests, refusals, suggestions

• 6 weeks: Work placement
  – Supported by workplace consultants
  – One afternoon per week in classroom

• 1 week: Classroom
Request – based on LWP data

Heather: Okay um now we’re about to start with the um … development session this afternoon we’ve got an outside speaker

Anna: Okay

Heather: Which means that you’ll be … out here by yourself and I wondered if you wouldn’t mind spending some of that time contacting … while no-one else is around contacting the people for their interviews and setting up the appointment times for their interviews, what we might need to do is send down a confirmation note… If we just tell them exactly where it is…

Later in the same interaction

Heather: … ring the applicants and say that…… see if you can ring her first…… check to see what time the plane actually lands…… just write down the list of their names…
Teaching socio-pragmatic skills
Relational talk

“when Sara first came here she asked how to respond if someone said “hello” in the lift and whether she should get into a conversation or not, and is it polite”

Comment from Kate, an employment consultant, identifying the “nuances of cultural appropriateness” as an important aspect of being able to relate to people
Benefit to employers

• In a recent interview at our recruitment agency, the manager made similar observations:
  
  “several employers identified that they had originally thought they were giving to the programme, but found that they had gained more than they gave because the input from the skilled migrant added to their processes and understanding”.

• An employment consultant 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”
The migrant workers’ evaluations

Comments from post-course interviews:

“My close friend said you sound bossy. I heard that a lot but I didn’t take it seriously. But now, from this course I think about that seriously. I should think about that all the time.”

“The way New Zealanders deal with [a] complaint is really surprising me. In my mind, if a waitress did not have good customer service skills, then she should be complained [to] directly. This will make her improve. New Zealanders tend to complain more indirectly. … And this way is more acceptable.”
Participants in the workplace research

- 4 men and 4 women: Russia, China, Hong Kong
- Gathered course data of various types
- Recorded data from a range of interactions in authentic workplaces where they had been placed as interns
Summary of data collected for each participant

Classroom:
- 4-7 Role-plays
- Final Interview
- Journal entries
- Reflections on development and Critical incidents
- Observations: Workplace, community
- Recorded group discussions
- 14 Discourse Completion Tasks
- Preliminary Interview
- Verbal reports

Participant:
- Oral Presentations
- Start
- End
- Reflections on development and Critical incidents
- Recorded group discussions
- Recorded interactions
- Critical incidents
- Weekly reflections
- Preliminary Interview
- Verbal reports

Workplace:
- Employer reports
- Pre-internship interactions
- Intern Interactions
- Workplace meetings
- Recorded Mentor/Consultant/Intern meetings
- Start
- End

Week 1 and 2
Week 5 and 6
Requests: role play

Role A: manager

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.

Role B: secretary

You have been working as a secretary for three years. Your boss asks you to stay late tonight to help prepare a report. You have made arrangements to watch your son’s school play tonight.
Requests: Week 1 Roleplay

Helena: oh Angela
Jenny: yes
Helena: do you have plans tonight
Jenny: I do actually yes
Helena: oh okay so do you think you can work a little bit late tonight
Jenny: well unfortunately I've got to go to a school play tonight I promised my son //+/ that I would go and watch him
Helena: /mm\/
Jenny: and he's expecting me to be there
Helena: oh okay I tell you why because our CEO got something very very urgent it's about our big project the big business is really important to our company
Week 1 Roleplay (continued)

Hel: so er he needs some help from you so if you can stay that would be great so do you think you can ( ) reschedule something about your family

Jen: look I'm really sorry I'd really like to help out but I you know I'm the only one who can make the play tonight cos my husband's out of town so I really can't reschedule it I really have to go (it's at six thirty tonight)

Hel: yeah oh I really hope you can do your work you can stay (for work) here
Week 6 Roleplay

Helena: oh Jenny
Jenny: oh hi Hannah
Helena: hi er do you have any plans tonight
Jenny: [drawls]: um: yes I do actually yes I'm going to my son's er concert
Helena: oh wow where about
Jenny: at his school it's a school concert and he's got one of the er he has to sing a song in the concert
Helena: I wonder what time is this start
Jenny: the concert's at six thirty
Week 6 Roleplay (contd)

Helena: six thirty er look there's a [laughs]: problem here: um CEO John he just gave me a call that he has a report a really urgent report to get it done tonight because he's going to meet his client tomorrow morning so er actually the report um already get th- is the second draft but just need to add some pictures and um the bibliography er so I wonder if you could stay until six …
Week 14 Roleplay

Helena: hi Jenny
Jenny: oh hi Rebecca
Helena: are you busy at the moment?
Jenny: [explains what she’s working on]
Helena: can I have a quick word?
I got a document from CEO and it is very very urgent report
I was wondering if you can stay a little bit late tonight to help to finish the report
Jenny: [explains problem] …
Helena: do you know anyone can take over from you?
Helena’s Comments

“in my previous job it is also in a accounting role but at that job I don’t know how to make a request … and also how to give the deadline to other people and how to get information from other people I don’t know how to say so … because I don’t know the technique so waste a lot of time and also the people don’t understand my inside my strength they only can see my only see my weakness”
Helena’s Comments

“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”
Workplace Request

Helena: um could you either …
I was wondering if you could you know forward this start list to me so I can see the details of those items and then I can enter into the c system cos I can’t see what they are
Helena’s control of relational talk

Edw:  mm three two eight five
      mm where do you go  where do you come from
      where do you er you where in Wellington are you
Hel:  Lower Hutt //+ yeah so\
Edw : /oh okay\\
Hel:  I catch a train and then I went into the campus
to do some um school work [laughs]
Edw :  wow [laughs]
Hel:  [laughs]: quickly: walk [laughs] from the railway station
to here um that's okay less than fifteen minutes though
that's really really good walking exercise [laughs]
in the morning
what about you where do you //+ live\
Helena’s control of relational talk
(continued)

Edw: /oh\ in Churton Park
Hel:  Churton Park so you //+ own your own transport\
Edw: /yeah ( )\ no I ride a bus
Hel:  oh yeah (  )
Edw: um we can't +++ [laughs]
Hel: so when you do the offshore one
    I think they’ll be much more difficult
    than this one + yeah
Helena’s control of relational talk

Hel:  I just look at the policy [laughs]
Edw:  yep
Hel:  like yeah and um and sh- ( )
  she gave me you gave me the the notes
Edw:  yes
Hel:  the drafts so
Edw:  yeah you can have a read through them
  if you want yeah
Hel:  do I have to //laughs//
Edw:  //laughs\\ it's really it's really quite easy
  but er the only thing that makes it hard
  is the volume example
Andrei’s control of relational talk

Emma: he's on the Victoria's um workpla- what-
Andrei: work- er English for professional purposes
Conrad: oh //okay yep oh\ nice
Emma: /yes and so he's working\\
Andrei: but anyway I graduated from the University of Otago
Conrad: oh did you
Andrei: the Department of Tourism
Conrad: oh lovely
Andrei: in two thousand and five
Conrad: my family's down in Dunedin it's a lovely
//place I lived there for a while\
Andrei’s relational talk (contd)

Andrei: /oh so really I know I know I know all Dunedin

Emma: mm //laughs// [laughs]

Andrei: /it's a very small place [laughs]

Conrad: /nice nice place it is it's got character though/

Andrei: it's becomes er just ( ) city when I- er when ( )

Conrad: oh yeah I know no I was in the fire service and we were very quiet eh over Christmas
Andrei’s relational talk at end of internship

Tim: but um I a very sad loss um for Wellington
    oh no yes for New Zealand I think
when Crusaders won is that right Priya (teasing tone)
And: [laughs]
Tim: that's very very disappointing… [transactional talk]
And: so you’re not Crusaders fan
Tim: no no they
And: who's who's fan are you?
Tim: I I am any other team //but the Crusaders\
And: /but but Crusad- [laughs]\
    and she's from Crusaders //[laughs]\
Tim: /I don't care if you're from South Africa\ or from Australia
And: oh
Tim: you have my support
Andrei and relational talk (continued)

And: oh
Tim: but Saturday was a very very um was very discouraged
And: and Crusaders won?
Tim: um do we have to talk about their win
    [laughs]: yes yes they won: they won
    I think the ref was on their side
    I think he was paid a large amount of money
And: bribed
Tim: yes
And: bribed

Priya: well you know All Blacks didn't want to have him
Comments from workplace mentor on issues around Andrei’s integration into workplace

Emm: the other thing i- the only other um feedback would be about um communication style um you're quite clear in what you say and your English is very good and you seem to understand pe- perfectly well so I have absolutely no issue with that but um the only thing I'd say is that um you can be very direct

And: mhm

Emm: you probably know that anyway you you need to think constantly about how can I just I want to say tone it down do you know what I mean?
The project team

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