Preparing ESL learners for self-presentation in institutional settings outside the classroom

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ABSTRACT
Adult English as a second language learners, of varying levels, face challenging situations outside of the classroom. This is not only because they may lack the linguistic skills necessary to navigate their way through verbal interactions with a range of English-speaking interlocutors in their everyday activities and negotiations, but also because they are often not familiar with rules of pragmatic appropriateness in particular English-speaking settings. High-stakes gatekeeping encounters, in which ESL learners’ verbal performance can have serious consequences for their future, are especially difficult and critical. Using a database of job interview transcriptions, triangulated with other data sources from an employment agency, this study identifies features of gatekeeping encounters which exhibit the interlocutors’ pragmatic competence, and which can be enhanced by raising ESL teachers’ and students’ awareness of certain key characteristics that will increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Introduction
Cross-cultural differences in speaking styles have long been recognised as a potential source of miscommunication between interlocutors (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu 1982; Gumperz 1982, 1992, 1996; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992). For this reason they have been given increasing amounts of attention by applied linguists interested in promoting the success of second language learners in a variety of verbal interactions. Only recently, however, have scholars addressed the issue of how teachers can help to improve, through instructed second language acquisition (SLA), language learners’ pragmatic and interactional competence, both in the classroom and in a number of other real-world settings in which language learners often find themselves (Kasper and Rose 2002). With the aim of gaining an understanding of one particular type of verbal interaction in which language learners frequently find themselves – gatekeeping encounters – this paper identifies features of successful interactions, and makes recommendations for how they can be promoted by teachers in the second language classroom, such that students
will be better prepared to demonstrate their pragmatic competence in institutional settings outside the classroom.

Gatekeeping encounters are verbal interactions in which Person A has the authority to judge Person B, and the outcome of that judgment will have an effect on Person B’s future. Gatekeeping encounters include such commonly experienced speech events as oral proficiency assessments, police interrogations, social welfare interviews, immigration and naturalisation interviews, medical and dental appointments, public school teacher–parent conferences, and job interviews, to name but a few.

This discussion focuses on job interviews; specifically, it refers to a subset of data collected for a larger analysis of intercultural gatekeeping encounters which took place in a northern Californian branch of FastEmp, a national employment agency (Kerekes 2003; Kerekes in press). FastEmp serves as an ideal setting for investigating cross-cultural patterns in gatekeeping behaviour, as the job candidates who apply for assignments through FastEmp come from a wide range of linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. FastEmp as an institution serves both client companies – those which, for a variety of reasons, seek to hire temporary or permanent employees through this agency – and job candidates, who seek light industrial or clerical positions. Light industrial jobs include warehouse work, assembly, machine operation and food handling. Clerical jobs range from basic filing and general office work to receptionist, data entry, word processing and executive administrative positions.

Both the uniqueness of FastEmp as a gatekeeping context, and the generalisability of findings from the study carried out at FastEmp, should be noted. On the one hand, the interviews done at FastEmp are distinct from many other job interviews, because the interviewer is not the eventual supervisor of the job candidate. Although if placed on an assignment the candidate will technically be employed by FastEmp, in practice the candidate is supervised by, and accountable to, an employee of another company, that is the client company which originally sought a worker through the employment agency. While the candidate’s eventual boss most likely has expertise in the skills for which the candidate has been selected, the person who conducts the job interview – a staffing supervisor at FastEmp – does not necessarily share that expertise. As an example: FastEmp receives a call from a client company seeking to fill a warehouse position. One of the qualifications for this position is that the candidate be able to operate a forklift. While the person at the client company who will eventually supervise the selected candidate most likely knows how to operate a forklift, the staffing supervisors at FastEmp most likely do not, and yet it is they who must select the best qualified...
candidate. This situation contrasts with many other kinds of employment interviews, in which the interviewer is directly and personally familiar with the skills that a qualified candidate must possess to gain the position.

On the other hand, findings from FastEmp are generalisable for two reasons. First, employment agencies, of which FastEmp is one (with more than 200 branches nationwide), operate globally. They fill an important gap in the industrial and corporate working world; namely, they provide a means of quickly finding replacements and/or additional workers for long- and short-term assignments without requiring the client company to become the responsible party in this undertaking. Employment agencies in Australia, the United States of America, and throughout the world rely on generalists among their employees to hire specialists to work for particular client companies. Second, while the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is different in employment agencies from other types of job interviews, they share certain structural characteristics and goals. Both employment agency interviews and other types of job interviews continually strive to cultivate accurate and efficient ways of assessing their job candidates in order to find and hire the most qualified one for the job. Thus, an understanding of the characteristics of successful job interviews at FastEmp can be transferred to effect successful interviews in other settings as well.

**Research questions**

In examining the discourse in the FastEmp *job interviews* (which were observed, audio- and video-recorded and then transcribed), as well as investigating the participants’ perspectives on these gatekeeping encounters (through *follow-up interviews* with the job candidates and *debriefing interviews* with the staffing supervisors who had conducted the job interviews), answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What aspects of the verbal interactions differentiate successful from failed job interviews?

2. Which aspects of successful job interviews can be highlighted for language learners so that they can incorporate such features into the strategies they employ when carrying out their own interviews, and thus increase the likelihood of achieving a successful outcome?

All of the interviews (job, follow-up and debriefing), as well as the candidates’ job applications, résumés and test scores, introductory and concluding interviews between FastEmp staff and me, site documents including company policies and memos, and my field notes, provided the
means of triangulation in drawing conclusions about the verbal interactions which took place.

This research draws on theories of institutional discourse; on the perspective that verbal interactions, communication and miscommunication are co-constructed; and on a social theoretical view of the role that non-linguistic, societal and contextual factors play in the construction of meaning. Power dimensions apparent in this study demonstrate not only the hierarchical nature of gatekeeping encounters, but also the societally determined characteristics of successful and failed job interviews.

**Cultural mismatches and the effect of instruction**

In his discussions of ethnic differences in communicative style and consequent intercultural miscommunication, Gumperz (1982) demonstrated resentment among Anglo and Indian employees who worked together at an airport (albeit in positions of differentiating status): the Anglos misinterpreted Indian English intonation patterns, perceiving the Indians to be rude when they used a downward intonation characteristic of their variety of English. After some metalinguistic guidance from the researchers in this study, both the Indian and Anglo participants learned why they misinterpreted each other’s behaviour, and this resulted in improved attitudes. Through his study, Gumperz showed the importance of instruction or informal guidance as a means of raising people’s consciousness to be able to interpret each other’s messages without being blocked by preconceived notions of each other’s speaking styles. He warned that cross-cultural and cross-ethnic communication breakdowns are what lead to negative stereotyping and the promulgation of social divisions. He pointed, however, to the difficulty in learning such lessons in a formal setting without actually experiencing them.

More recent research, however, specifically on interlanguage pragmatics and second language instruction, has demonstrated the value and efficacy of instructed pragmatics in the language classroom as well as in informal settings (see, for example, Hall 1999; Kasper and Rose 2002). Some courses and/or textbooks have begun to direct language learners’ attention to issues of cross-cultural workplace communication. Kuga’s (1996) guidebook for employees in culturally and linguistically diverse workplaces, for example, demonstrates how supervisors take into consideration their employees’ cultural backgrounds in strategising how to communicate with them. Other texts, such as Mawer’s (1993) *Communication syllabus framework for the metals and engineering industry*, have identified in detail the communicative skills necessary for performing effectively in a particular workplace setting; in this case, Australia’s metals and engineering industry.
Co-construction

In contrast to Gumperz’s (1982) attribution of miscommunication to cultural differences, the successful interpretation of an interaction, as identified by Shea (1994: 358), is that which is ‘not primarily a matter of chance match or mismatch, but is rather situated within discursive practice that allows a reciprocal, balanced participation which can incorporate different cultural “styles”’. Cultural differences do not, therefore, preclude successful interactions. Shea argues that, rather than simply attributing misunderstandings to cross-cultural differences (which then often get associated with damaging stereotypes), one must consider the interaction itself as an arena in which a unique type of understanding (in that context) is established between the interlocutors. Their discourse is jointly constructed. Shea criticises Gumperz’s approach for disregarding the ‘mediated character of interpretation’ (Shea 1994: 360): ‘[T]he talk of one speaker is always mediated by the response it receives’ (Shea 1994: 363). Still, he acknowledges that ‘speakers can also structure a distinct and asymmetric participation wherein the NNS [non-native speaker] is characterized as different and inappropriate’ (Shea 1994: 358).

Social theoretical explanations of cross-cultural communication

Social theorists examine miscommunication in terms of the larger, societal meanings interlocutors bring with them to their verbal interactions. Regardless of the words which are exchanged in any interaction, their meanings are interpreted in terms of the speakers who utter them, of those speakers’ places in society and of the power those speakers represent. As Gee (1996: 124) states, ‘This is because what is important is not just how you say it, not just language in any sense, but who you are and what you’re doing when you say it’. The ‘who you are’ and ‘what you’re doing’ components of the message conveyed are what Gee calls ‘Discourse’ (spelled with a capital ‘D’). Discourses, Gee states:

> are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise.

(Gee 1996: 127)

Scholars of workplace communication and language learning in a variety of Australian contexts have shown how ESL learners’ institutional socialisation (or lack thereof) in Australian schools and workplaces affects their communicative style and corresponding effectiveness. Gibbons (2001), for
example, demonstrates how NNS public schoolchildren come to acquire a new, more academic register through their interactions with their teacher.

Discourses are ways of displaying membership of particular groups, and can involve props such as books, magazines, classrooms, or other objects or physical features, which contribute to the meaning of a message. In the case of a job interview involving a written application, for example, the application – the way it is written and presented – is such a prop.

The FastEmp application

The job candidate provides the staffing supervisor with a wealth of information about her/himself even before the job interview commences. From the candidate’s application, the staffing supervisor forms an impression of the job candidate’s qualifications even before they meet. The way the candidate fills out the application form indicates to the staffing supervisor how familiar she or he is with the employment agency application process. Everything from the actual handwriting, to the dates of particular assignments, to a candidate’s home address (from which side of the so-called tracks the candidate comes) and last name (is it an Anglo name? a Hispanic name?) contributes to the staffing supervisor’s impression of the candidate prior to conducting the interview. Added to this is their immediate impression upon seeing the candidate, before the interview begins: how is the candidate dressed? what colour is her or his skin? is it a man or a woman? does the candidate carry a briefcase? The result is that the staffing supervisor is prepared to ask questions in a particular way, on the basis of their expectations of the candidate.

Rates of success

As is the case in many gatekeeping encounters, the gatekeepers in the study I discuss here (staffing supervisors) represent a dominant group of Americans – namely, European American (White), educated, middle-class women – while many of their interviewees (job candidates) come from less powerful groups, such as ethnic minorities, speakers of non-standard varieties of English, non-native-speaking immigrants, and people with fewer years of formal education than the staffing supervisors. Interestingly, the success rate of job candidates in this study was unequally distributed, depending on which social factors the candidates had in common with their interlocutor (the interviewing staffing supervisor). Of 48 job candidates – representing equal numbers of females (24) and males (24), equal numbers of native speakers (NS) (24) and non-native speakers (NNS) (24), and equal numbers of light industrial (24) and clerical candidates (24) – the least successful group were the male light industrial candidates. Ten of the 14 male light industrial
candidates (71%) had failed or weak job interviews. In contrast, as depicted in Figure 1, only three of the ten female light industrial candidates (30%) and three of the ten male clerical candidates had failed or weak interviews, and a mere one out of fourteen (7%) female clerical candidates had a failed or weak interview (hers was categorised as ‘failed’).

![Figure 1: Success and failure rate of job candidates, by gender and job type](image)

Not only did the male light industrial candidates differ from the staffing supervisors in their gender, but also in their educational and socio-economic backgrounds. The staffing supervisors, unlike the male light industrial job candidates they interviewed, had all received at least two years of higher education and were from a middle-class background. The majority of the light industrial candidates came from self-described working-class backgrounds and had little or no education beyond high school. Furthermore, while all of the staffing supervisors were White (of European descent), three of the ten failed male light industrial candidates were Black, five were Latino, and two were Asian; none was White. Of those male light industrial candidates who had failed and weak interviews, six were NNS and four were NS. To summarise, the candidates who had the least (in terms of social factors) in common with their interviewers had the highest failure rate.

**What is the target language?**

Power differentials on the basis of skin colour, gender, class and lifestyle can serve to legitimise and reproduce boundaries between members of different
groups, and these are manifested in their verbal interactions (Fairclough 1989; Bernstein 1996). It is not enough for two speakers to say approximately the same thing in order to be interpreted in the same way. If they look different (for example, in race or gender) or speak differently (for example, a British accent versus an Indian one) – that is if different expectations are held of the speakers (Tannen 1993a, 1993b) – they are likely to be interpreted differently as well (Gumperz 1982), very often to the detriment of speakers of a low-prestige variety of English (including non-native and non-standard varieties).

The question arises, therefore, as to what ESL learners need to be trained in. With those who fail at gatekeeping encounters, such as job interviews, is it their language and, in particular, the non-native-like features of their language which lead to their failure? To what degree can features of their interactional style unrelated to their linguistic competence (for example, accent and/or grammar) account for their success or failure? And, correspondingly, how can such features be improved through consciousness-raising and instructed SLA?

Findings from this study suggest that the skills or competence necessary to achieve a positive outcome in gatekeeping encounters do not relate directly to the native-ness (or non-native-ness) of the participants. Successful interactions are achieved by NS and NNS representing a wide range of L2 abilities. Furthermore, the skills and strategies which contribute to successful outcomes are identifiable and achievable by participants, regardless of their native- or non-native-speaking status (while in contrast, as discussed above, gender and educational backgrounds do correspond to variable success rates). In fact, of the 31 successful candidates in this study, 15 were NNS and 16 were NS; of the 17 weak and failed candidates, nine were NNS and eight were NS.

A job candidate has to know how to present her/himself in a way that will convince the interviewer that s/he will make a good representative of the company. At FastEmp this translates into someone who will complete each assignment to the satisfaction of the client company. FastEmp staffing supervisors’ assessments of those they interviewed addressed the candidates’ knowledge of how to communicate effectively in a job interview. This included their observations of the candidate’s interpersonal skills and ability to demonstrate desirable characteristics, such as being punctual, efficient and reliable, and to answer in an articulate manner questions typically asked in job interviews, for example, ‘What are your strengths?’ and ‘What did you like about that job?’. One staffing supervisor made the following reply in answer to my question of what qualities she seeks in a job candidate:
I'm looking for a sense of, that they really want to be there, not that they're just y'know doing it because they just think it's funny or y'know whatever. I really look for their, how sincere they are, how serious they are, how dedicated they seem to be, their work history. … Eye contact, posture, um, whether they're chewing gum …

She continued by describing some of the undesirable characteristics of job candidates that can be evident both in their non-verbal and verbal behaviour:

… spinning in their chair, looking this way and that way, y'know answering my questions with really brief answers, those types of things. … Like, if I asked them a question and they don't elaborate, they don't take the next step to like give me an answer besides a yes or a no.

She further elaborated on the importance of communicative competence in the workplace, as it relates both to native- and non-native-speaking job candidates. She explained that communication is important to FastEmp, both as a tool that job candidates must utilise in order to carry out their assignments effectively, and as a means of representing FastEmp. For this reason, instances of slang and ‘unclear’ speech are deemed unattractive by FastEmp staff:

We have to be able to communicate with them [job candidates]. Occasionally, we have a lot of nonnative English speakers working for us. … If they can understand directions, if they can, if they're safe working there, y'know, if there's an emergency will they understand what needs to happen, how to exit the facility. Those are the things that we look for. People that just have poor command of the English language like slang, y'know that are native English speakers that don't speak it clearly, um, again, they understand the communication, they would be safe in an environment, but are they gonna be good representatives of FastEmp. So, y'know we have placed people in more … jobs away from the phone and away from a lot of customer contact so that they can just do the job and don’t have to speak a lot to people.

Certainly, not all candidates have equal opportunities to exhibit elements of successful gatekeeping encounters. As demonstrated above, and in line with Gee’s (1996) explanations, social factors such as gender, race and educational background do predict, to a certain degree, the success rate of candidates. It is through building rapport (Tannen 1993a), establishing co-membership (Johnston 2003) and finding common ground (Kerekes in press) that job candidates and their interviewers are able to co-construct successful employment interviews. Those job candidates who share social factors with their interviewers – and, as mentioned above, at FastEmp they are primarily White, middle-class, college-educated women in their late twenties to early thirties – more easily establish common ground. However, all candidates
can improve their potential for building rapport, establishing co-membership and, consequently, finding common ground with their interlocutors such that they can increase the likelihood of succeeding in their job interviews.

‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ answers

In the 48 job interviews observed and recorded, several commonly occurring verbal acts were identified which frequently resulted in the candidates’ being perceived by the staffing supervisors, at least temporarily, as dishonest, untrustworthy and, therefore, not eligible for employment with FastEmp. The source of each of these problems lay in the written application filled out by the candidate and perused by the staffing supervisor during the job interview. These problems included: 1) instances in which a job candidate stated as their desired salary an amount higher than that which the staffing supervisor felt was suitable for the candidate’s qualifications and/or job possibilities at FastEmp; 2) instances in which a job candidate used references deemed inappropriate by the staffing supervisors (for example, names of co-workers and friends as referees rather than former supervisors or employers); and 3) instances in which a job candidate was unable to give an acceptable verbal account for gaps they had left in the work history section of their job application, or jobs s/he had quit. The excerpts in the Appendix (p 40) illustrate each of these potentially problematic moves, respectively.

In the case of FastEmp, it was found that while the occurrences of these particular verbal actions were potentially damaging to the gatekeeping encounter, those candidates who were able to exhibit (verbally) compensatory characteristics overcame their disadvantage. They were able to reestablish a trusting relationship with the interviewing staffing supervisor, and, as a result, succeeded in qualifying for a position with FastEmp. Of the potentially problematic moves identified above, most were problematic for predictable, systematic reasons. For example (see excerpts in the Appendix), if a candidate stated on the written application a ‘desired salary’ higher than the amount the staffing supervisor felt was reasonable, she asked the candidate to explain, justify or change this criterion. Depending on the candidate’s response, the staffing supervisor either maintained her assessment that the candidate would not reliably stay on a FastEmp job, because s/he wanted higher pay, or revised her assessment and reestablished a trusting relationship after gaining assurance from the candidate that a lower paying job would also be acceptable. Similarly, regarding the references provided on the application, it was clear to the staffing supervisor as soon as she asked the candidate what kind of references these were – supervisors, co-workers, friends – whether she felt the candidate could be trusted or not. Finally, if on the application a candidate
left no gaps between jobs listed in the work history section, s/he did not raise the suspicion of the staffing supervisor. However, if gaps were left, then the supervisor questioned the candidate to determine whether the gaps were legitimate, from her viewpoint, or not. Thus, there were ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers to these questions.5

In contrast to the questions discussed above, others posed by the interviewers had no consistently ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. One such question referred to job candidates’ work histories and asked them, in reference to a particular previously held job listed on their application, why they had left that job. Twenty-two of the 48 candidates in this study were asked this question, of whom 12 succeeded, four had weak interviews and 6 had failed interviews. Answers ranged from wanting a better paying job, to relocating, to taking care of a sick family member, but there appeared to be no relation between the content of their answers to this question and their interview success rate. Thus, from a teacher’s perspective, no ‘right’ answer can be prescribed and learned by ESL speakers (or anyone else) interested in applying for a job with FastEmp or another employment agency. Through an investigation of the distribution of successful and failed job interviews in which this question was asked, however, and by considering the social characteristics of the interlocutors involved, we can identify a number of positive characteristics of job interviews which, if utilised, result in a successful interview despite some less than favourable circumstances. It is these characteristics on which ESL teachers are encouraged to focus, in their materials development and classroom activities, so as to address the acquisition of pragmatic competence necessary to perform successfully in institutional settings outside of the (language) classroom.

**Suggestions for teachers and future job candidates**

Suggestions for preparing job candidates to succeed in their job interviews, based on these findings, incorporate two main ideas: 1) A number of strategies can be taught to, and utilised by, candidates such that, in completing their job applications and responding to questions asked during an interview, their discourse style will more closely match that of their interviewers. 2) Job candidates can also purposely exhibit certain characteristics throughout their job interviews that will result in gaining and/or maintaining the interviewers’ trust and establishing a rapport with their interviewers, thereby increasing their likelihood of success.

The first set of strategies involves, through rather prescriptive means, teaching job candidates what they are expected to write on their job applications. Specifically, with regard to employment agencies, this entails the
following three strategies. First, they should familiarise themselves with the range of salaries offered by the employment agency for the sorts of job assignments in which they are interested, and should state as their desired salary an amount which falls within that range. Second, they should know that appropriate references in this professional context are only current/former supervisors; names of personal friends and/or co-workers should be avoided. Third, candidates should be instructed in how to list on the work history section of the application all of their work experiences chronologically, including the precise dates of employment, and to account for the entire period of time between their first job and their present one. In addition to knowing what the appropriate content is for each of these spaces in the written application, job candidates should know how to write this information using correct spelling and clear penmanship. While all these suggestions come directly from findings from the FastEmp study, they are generalisable to other employment agencies. Finally, other aspects of the company should also be researched by the job candidate to ensure as much familiarity with the culture of the company as possible.

None of these suggestions is self-evident to a job candidate not already well versed in the discourse of the FastEmp staffing supervisors, or, in general, of the company at which the candidate seeks employment. Cross-culturally, employment application procedures vary tremendously. Beyond that, the written instructions on job applications are often obtuse. In the FastEmp application, for example, under the ‘professional/work’ references space candidates are instructed to provide names, titles and phone numbers of three ‘professional/work … references that are not related to you who have knowledge of your skill level’. The fact that referees should be neither personal friends/acquaintances nor even co-workers is not made explicit to the job candidates. This in and of itself demonstrates, firstly, that to a great extent how one can best adapt to a particular work culture is not made explicit. There is no instruction manual on how to do this; one must, instead, intuit what will be construed as appropriate behaviour. This is, of course, easier for those who have already been socialised to know how to use the appropriate institutional discourse. Secondly, instructions which are given often require some reading between the lines in order to follow them not just literally, but correctly, that is appropriately.

The second set of suggestions for job candidates, which involves exhibiting certain positive characteristics throughout their job interviews, is more difficult to prescribe with specific ‘Dos’ or ‘Don’ts’ than the above-mentioned prescriptions for presenting an appropriate written job application. Nevertheless, three salient features identified in the FastEmp data can be
generalised more broadly to other employment interview settings, and can be subjects of study in ESL and communication classes, such that job candidates who have undergone this training will be competent to make a positive impression on their interviewers utilising these strategies. These features are: presenting oneself in a positive light, building rapport with the interviewer, and demonstrating flexibility.

**Positive self-presentation**

Regardless of their language ability, candidates can impress their interviewers by showing interest, asking questions or otherwise seeking information, and exemplifying, through descriptions of their past work experience, how they have taken the initiative to accomplish tasks. In Excerpt 1, Jorge, a male NNS clerical candidate whose L1 is Tagalog, expresses self-confidence in his answer to Erin’s question of how comfortable he is using Powerpoint. He not only states that he is comfortable using the software Powerpoint to make slides, but also that, utilising his skills, he can produce a good presentation:

**EXCERPT 1**

1 Erin Um.. I think data en- for data entry types of
2 positions it’s really important that your
3 résumé’s perfect and it looks pretty good.
4 It’s a lot of information.. but it looks
5 pretty good. Um: were you gonna make a
6 comment or, how comfortable are you on
7 Powerpoint.
8 Jorge I (x) uh I can make slides. If the people
9 give us a project we can make a good
10 presentation.

Jorge also shows interest in FastEmp procedures and future possibilities, demonstrating that he is serious about finding a job and is curious to learn more about FastEmp’s placement process. In Excerpt 2, he demonstrates this by initiating a question (in contrast to the general format in which the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee/job candidate provides answers):

**EXCERPT 2**

1 Jorge Can I ask a after some time uh depending on my
2 performance at work
3 Erin Depending on what?
4 Jorge Depending on my per- performance at work in
The successful job candidates express enthusiasm, in a number of ways, regarding previous jobs they have held as well as future options. In Excerpt 3, Jorge exemplifies this in his answer to Erin’s question about his strengths. His answer, that he is dependable, falls squarely into the realm of qualifications sought by job interviewers at FastEmp. These qualifications include reliability, sincerity and follow-through; in other words, trustworthiness. Jorge also elaborates on his initial response to Erin’s question by volunteering that he enjoys his work.

**EXCERPT 3**

1 Erin Tell me this Jorge why what would you say that
2 your strengths are. If I was presenting you
3 to one of my clients.
4 Jorge As far as job is concerned I am dependable. I
5 can prove that.
6 Erin Anything else you'd want to say about your
7 strengths?
8 Jorge No. I’m enjoying to complete my assignment.
9 Erin Mkay. Great.

Another candidate for clerical work, Xalitch (a female Latina bilingual Spanish and English speaker), similarly expresses enjoyment in carrying out certain assignments, while at the same time sharing something about herself (that she loves to talk) which is not strictly related to her job skills. As shown in the next excerpt, she also demonstrates her knowledge of the sorts of skills that will appeal to the staffing supervisor (in this case being helpful in the workplace):

**EXCERPT 4**

1 Amy Do you like working on the phone... looks like
2 you've had a lot of experience.
3 Xalitch Yeah I I don't mind it I love, I love talking
(laughs)).

Amy    Yeah? Okay. Okay, good. What would you say
if you could take one thing out of um Sanyan
and one thing out of Garian as the most
favorite things of the job and put ‘em
together what would it be.

Xalitch  Gosh um … I don’t know probably helping.
Amy     Okay.
Xalitch  Helping people um, trying to resolve. Y’know
do whatever I can for people.

Many successful candidates promote themselves by offering self-praise, such as Becky, a NNS (Samoan) light industrial candidate who, when describing her responsibilities at her current job, explains that she is always called to do extra tasks because her co-workers are ‘lazy to do their work so they said … you do it for them. … they said … Becky, you’re the fastest one (laughs)’. Cindy, a White NS clerical candidate, engages in self-promotion when asked whether she can use the Excel spreadsheet software, by presenting herself as someone who can teach herself on the job: ‘I know how to manipulate [Excel documents] and go around in that. I’ve actually kind of self- I’m self taught on the job’. Roxana, a NNS (Mexican) clerical candidate, also takes the opportunity to offer self-praise when answering a question about what she enjoys in a particular job: ‘I like the interaction with people. I think that I’m a very good listener too’.

Establishing rapport

Establishing rapport in a conversation is ‘a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences’ (Tannen 1990: 77). Nine of the 48 job interviews in this study (19%) involved some informal chit-chat – conversation not directly relevant to the job interview – between the supervisor and the job candidate. All nine of these interviews were successful. The off-topic, casual conversations which occurred during these job interviews had the effect of establishing a feeling of solidarity between the interlocutors. In Excerpt 5, for example, the interlocutors establish a comfort level at the beginning of Xalitch’s interview by joking about the difficult pronunciation of her name. They then ascertain that they have a common professional acquaintance, which serves as a means of establishing common ground between them. Lines 23–26 demonstrate the fluidity with which they exchange turns, overlapping each other’s turns and exhibiting collaborative completions.
EXCERPT 5

1 Amy I'm Amy. Nice to meet you. Okay oh did you
2 already explain.. Okay. I'm gonna write this
3 here how would the best way for me to spell it
4 phonetically?
5 Xalitch Probably S-a-l-i-c-h for you to be able to
6 [(x x) ]
7 Amy [Xalitch.] Great ((laughs)). I bet you get
8 that all the time.
9 Xalitch Yeah.
10 Amy How to pronounce it okay. Great. Well thank
11 you for coming down and you know Kelly? How
12 do you know Kelly?
13 Xalitch Um, I've worked with her at Languard Staffing.
14 Amy Oh okay.
15 Xalitch Actually I'm still with them but they moved to
16 APS
17 Amy What's APS what do you mean?
18 Xalitch It's it's a security company actually
19 Langard was like a sister company to APS
20 Amy Okay.
21 Xalitch So now they're all one.
22 Amy Oh okay. Great.
23 Xalitch Um:=
24 Amy =And um so you're currently=
25 Xalitch =I'm currently=
26 Amy =there.

Strategies of engaging in casual chit-chat in order to find common ground and establish co-membership can be addressed in ESL classes by teaching students to personalise their interactions, and to identify and volunteer information about themselves which they perceive will overlap with the interests or experiences of their interlocutor.

Flexibility

Finally, another way candidates can impress their interviewer is to show that they are willing to accept a range of different assignments, pay rates, job locations, work conditions, etc. This not only makes it easier for the staffing
supervisor to find a suitable match for the candidate, but also impresses upon them that this candidate will be flexible – that is, easy to work with, on the job. Xalitch demonstrates flexibility in the salary she is willing to accept:

**EXCERPT 6**

1. Amy  Okay. Great. And um you you have your hourly
2.       rate as fifteen. ((coughs)) ‘Scuse me… is
3. Xalitch  there any is there much flexibility in there?
4.         For like a range?
5. Amy    Yeah. I I I would go down, as long as it’s
6.         not less than what I’m making right now.
7. Xalitch  Right, right.
8. Amy     Yeah.
9. Xalitch  Um yeah that’s no problem. Okay that just
10. Amy    helps me know if you know some things come up
11.       if I should definitely not call you or just to
12.       keep the door open to other opportunities.
13. Xalitch  Go ahead and keep the door open.

Presenting oneself positively, establishing rapport and solidarity with one’s interlocutor, and being flexible can all contribute to cooperative, collaborative interactions ranging far beyond job interviews. In order for ESL teachers to address these strategies with their students, they must be familiar with the sociolinguistic concepts of rapport and solidarity, the role that rapport plays in facilitating smooth communication and contributing to making positive impressions, and cross-cultural differences in rapport-building. Building rapport has to do with finding commonalities among the interlocutors. Teachers should be familiar with, and share with their students, how gender, class, education and native culture (C1) background influence discourses (Gee 1996).

**Implications**

The complexities of the meanings and uses of various speech acts in gatekeeping encounters – for example, asking questions, providing answers, refusing offers, accepting offers, etc.) – warrant an in-depth examination of their use by teachers, students and speakers from a variety of cultures. By further investigating how people form their perceptions and judgments of one another, interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) research can provide pedagogical tools to help people to view one another with more objectivity than might be the case when listening to their interlocutors through the biases of their
own cultures and societal upbringing. A growing body of studies strongly indicates that explicit instruction can improve learners’ acquisition of pragmatic competence in the L2, and it is increasingly apparent that L2 pedagogy should be informed by ILP research (House 1996; Kasper 1996; Rose and Kasper 2001). Judd (1999) suggests that teachers raise learners’ cognitive awareness of cross-linguistic pragmatic differences, ensuring that they notice the differences through two instructional approaches: a teacher-fronted presentation of what we know, from SLA research, about pragmatics and pragmatic competence; and experiential learning through observation and questioning and/or interviewing pragmatically competent members of the culture in which the target language is used. These instructional approaches will be more effective if teachers negotiate the cultural content of the curriculum they teach in light of the potential incongruence of their own identities and beliefs, and those of their students. According to Kramsch (1993) the:

> only way to start building a more complete and less partial understanding of both C1 and C2 is to develop a third perspective, that would enable learners to take both an insider’s and an outsider’s view on C1 and C2. It is precisely that third place that cross-cultural education should seek to establish.

(Kramsch 1993: 210)

Findings from this study indicate the importance of looking beyond the interaction itself in order to understand how and why people interpret each other’s messages as they do. To investigate how intercultural communication can be more successful in contexts such as gatekeeping encounters, one must look at factors outside of the interview which influence the interactions in the interview.
Appendix

EXCERPTS FROM JOB INTERVIEWS AND TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Too high desired salary

Job Candidate: Martin (Light Industrial, Male, L1 = English, Black)

Staffing Supervisor: Amy (Female, White)

1 Amy Mkay. (·hhh) The position that we have
2 that we're placing for? in Palo Alto, those
3 /positions \ for people that don't have any
4 fiber optic assembly experience, (·hhh) are
5 starting at about seven fifty to eight
6 dollars an hour. And if someone had . . fiber
7 optic experience, the most they would pay is
8 twelve dollars. And I notice that you have
9 as your minimum / f i f \teen dollars.
10 {((smiles)) So} ((laughs)) . . that might
11 be kind of a . .
12 Martin Well I'm [inter]ested=
13 Amy um .
14 Martin = in um . . first getting the experience with
15 fiber optics, I'm a quick learn/er \ and um . .
16 I figure that I won't have to stay . . making
17 seven fifty to eight bucks an hour too long.
18 Amy Mkay,
19 Martin [But] I need the experience
20
21 Amy [mkay]
22 Martin [for f ]iber optics.
23 Amy Um . . w- one thing that . . that you should
24 know um . . you / may have \ to make . . seven
25 fifty eight dollars . . for a while I mean . .
26 most of the people that we have working at
27 this site (·hhh) that make . . seven fifty
28 eight dollars an hour, they maybe get a raise
29 . . but it's like a quarter? um so you're
30 really I mean they do pay people . . eight
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31 dollars an /ho\ur, . . eight fifty . . for these
32 (hhh) . . positions. So . . I mean I I I
33 hesitate to have you cut your salary in half.
34 Martin (-hhh) Well [um  ]
35 Amy [For the] for the job.=
36 Martin =first of all it’s better to be working for
37 some thing than to be working for nothing. Or
38 not working at all ((laughs)) not earning
39 anything so (-hhh) um I really . . must have a
40 job soon.
41 Amy Mhmm.=
42 Martin =Yeah.

Using friends as references^9

Job Candidate: Martin (Light Industrial, Male, L1 = English, Black)
Staffing Supervisor: Amy (Female, White)

1 Amy Now these people that you have down as
2 references Ron Lewis parts technician was he a
3 supervisor or a manager or a co-worker?
4 Martin Never a co-worker. These are these are just
5 references
6 Amy These are friends?
7 Martin These are friends. (x x x x)
8 Amy These are personal friends okay. I can’t have
9 friends be the references. They need to be
10 professional, work references

Gaps in work history^10

Job Candidate: Martin (Light Industrial, Male, L1 = English, Black)
Staffing Supervisor: Amy (Female, White)

1 Amy Okay. Now tell me about um working at
2 Peninsula Auto: (1) °\what is /that°
3 Martin Dismantlers.
4 Amy Dismantlers okay. /First \of all um: it
5 shows that you stopped working in there of
6 Dec/ember of ninety/eight=
7 Martin  =Y[es. ]
8 Amy      [What] have you been doing since then.
9 Martin  Uh looking for /work
10 Amy     … Been four months?
11 Martin  Um: (1) yes well i- in between looking for
12        \work uh I’m als\o a tech/ni \cian at um: …
13        uh (1.5) u- going out looking uh I know
14        people who need:s uh: . . technicians from
15        time to time, (need ‘cuz need) /they \need
16        work on their cars \so I’ve been . . doing
17        /part time \work on=
18 Amy     =You do that on your /own \or you [(x) ]
19 Martin  [On my]
20        own. Yes.
21 Amy     Okay, (4.5) okay.

Transcription symbols used

[ ]       overlap
=         latching
..        pause less than 0.5 second
…         pause greater than 0.5 second and less than 1 second
(1)       timed pause (in seconds)
:         elongation
-         cut-off
.         final falling tone
,         slight rise
?         final rising tone
?,        weaker rising tone
/         higher pitch in following syllable(s)
\         lower pitch in following syllable(s)
!         animated tone
italics   slightly louder volume
CAPITALS much louder volume
softer volume

(hhh) audible aspiration (out-breath)

(·hhh) audible inhalation (in-breath)

(text) transcriptionist doubt; a good guess at an unclear segment

((phenomenon)) vocal or nonvocal, nonlexical phenomenon which interrupts lexical stretch

( ) unintelligible speech

(xx) unintelligible speech with a good guess at the number of syllables (indicated by number of x’s)

{((phenomenon)) text} vocal or nonvocal, nonlexical phenomenon that co-occurs with lexical segment indicated between curly brackets.

NOTES

1 Interactional competence refers to the notion that individuals contribute their linguistic and pragmatic resources to a jointly constructed verbal interaction; these resources include knowledge of rhetorical scripts, lexis, syntactic patterns, how turns are managed, topical organisation, and how to signal boundaries and transitions between interactions (Young 2000). By using these resources, the interactional competence exhibited by the participants belongs to all of the participants and cannot be attributed to any individual in the interaction.

2 For operationalised definitions of ‘gatekeeping encounter’, see Schiffrin (1994) and Erickson and Shultz (1982).

3 FastEmp is a pseudonym. In order to protect the privacy of the participants in this study, all other names and identifying information have also been replaced by pseudonyms.

4 Note that success, for the purposes of this discussion, entailed that the candidate was assessed by the staffing supervisors as qualified to be employed by FastEmp, and that failure indicated the staffing supervisors judged the candidate ineligible for work with FastEmp. The weak designation was given to candidates whose interviewing competence was assessed by the staffing supervisors as inadequate, but who qualified for work with FastEmp in spite of this assessment (eg the candidate performed poorly in the interview, but the interview served only as a formality because the candidate had been sent by a client company to interview with FastEmp for a position already created by the client company for that candidate).

5 This is not to say that each candidate was given the same opportunity to rectify ‘wrong’ answers. Rather, some candidates – those who, for other reasons, had already impressed the staffing supervisors as trustworthy – were given the benefit of the
doubt and often were not required to explain themselves. Others were questioned severely, and their answers served either to confirm the staffing supervisors’ suspicions that this candidate could not be trusted or to revise the staffing supervisors’ impression of the candidate to be more positive.


7 See, for example, Spencer-Oatey 2000; see also Roberts 1998 for a comparison of British and Australian contexts of multiculturalism, in which cross-cultural miscommunication or unequal treatment is sometimes institutionally overlooked.

8 See Kerekes (2003) for analysis of the function of demanding an inappropriately high salary.

9 See Kerekes (2004) for analysis of the function of using friends as references.


REFERENCES


Johnston, A. (2003, March). Comembership in immigration gatekeeping interviews:


