

3

The not-so generic skills: Teaching employability communication skills to adult migrants

Lynda Yates

Sample materials by Terry Griffin and Jenny Guilfoyle



Published and distributed by the AMEP Research Centre on behalf of
the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Macquarie University
Sydney NSW 2109

Author: Yates, Lynda.

Title: The not-so generic skills : teaching employability skills to adult migrants / author, Lynda Yates.

Publisher: North Ryde, N.S.W. : NCELTR, 2007.

ISBN 9781741382785 (pbk.)

Subjects: Immigrants – Education – Australia. Vocational guidance.

Other Authors: AMEP Research Centre.

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (Australia)

Dewey Number: 374.013



MACQUARIE
UNIVERSITY ~ SYDNEY

© Commonwealth of Australia 2008

The AMEP Research Centre is a consortium of the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University in Sydney, and the National Institute for Education at La Trobe University in Melbourne. The Research Centre was established in January 2000 and is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Copyright

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Writers

Lynda Yates

Sample material by Terry Griffin and Jenny Guilfoyle.

Project team

Project Manager: Louise Melov

Production Manager: Louisa O'Kelly

Cover design: Simon Leong Design

Text design and layout: Equation Corporate Design

Contents

Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Series introduction	vii
Denise E Murray	
Introduction	viii
Lynda Yates	
Section 1 Background	1
Chapter 1 The nature of employability skills	2
Chapter 2 Issues for newly arrived adults	13
Chapter 3 Culture busting: understanding and teaching communication skills.....	28
Section 2 Classroom perspectives	35
Chapter 4 The <i>Communication skills project</i>	36
Chapter 5 An employee negotiates leave	43
Chapter 6 A boss negotiates a change in roster	53
Chapter 7 A boss complains	62
Chapter 8 Colleagues negotiate a time to meet	71
Section 3 Where to now?	79
Chapter 9 Implications for communication skills training	80

Abbreviations

AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
AMES Victoria	Adult Multicultural Education Services, Victoria
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
CIT	Canberra Institute of TAFE, ACT
CSWE	Certificate in Spoken and Written English
DEST	(Australian Government) Department of Education, Science and Training
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
ESL	English as a Second Language
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NCVQ	British National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NQC	National Quality Council
NTQC	National Training Quality Council
NSW AMES	NSW Adult Migrant English Service
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Acknowledgments

Many thanks are due to those who made this book possible, including the many dedicated teachers working on the AMEP in Melbourne and Canberra and all around Australia who collected data, developed and trialled materials, and collaborated in presenting workshops and giving feedback on the projects. They are too many to name, but deserve the highest praise for their tireless work in pursuit of the best for their students. Special mention should be made, though, of Terry Griffin and Jenny Guilfoyle from AMES Vic for their hard work and great patience in developing the materials included in the volume. Thanks should also go to the two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to improve the final drafts, and to the editors for providing that vital external eye. Julie Deblaquiere was, as ever, frighteningly efficient, eagle-eyed and uncomplaining in all her invaluable research assistance. To Dai Harris go special thanks for vital domestic support at critical moments. All errors, of course, remain mine.

Series introduction

Teacher research in the field of second language teaching and learning has gained prominence in recent years. Such re-examination of the activity of teaching ‘connects the “doing” of teaching with the “questioning” of research’ (Freeman 1998: ix), a practice that Freeman calls teacher-research. While action research is a popular research methodology used in teacher-research (see for example, Burns 1999; Edge 2001), action research and teacher-research are not synonymous. Action research has a broader focus than teacher-led inquiry, focusing as it does on the action research cycle – the iteration of findings of research that lead to action, which is again analysed, leading to further action. Teacher-research however, is teachers’ judgments and beliefs, ‘based not simply on experience but on an articulated, disciplined understanding of that experience’ (Freeman 1998: 3), which may or may not involve action research as a methodology for inquiry. The focus, rather, is on inquiry and how inquiry leads teachers to better understand what is happening in their classrooms.

Teaching in Action volumes report on teacher-research – in some cases where action research was a pivotal methodology and in other cases where a variety of research methodologies were employed. The series is designed to present research-based activities that classroom teachers have developed and have trialled in their or others’ classrooms. The goal of the series is to reflect teachers’ experience and points of view, and to illustrate how that point of view or understanding developed as a result of their particular enquiry. Each volume focuses on a specific area of second language teaching and learning. Each volume in the series is divided into two main sections. The first provides theoretical perspectives and a brief discussion of previous research findings on the topic. The second section has a practical orientation and illustrates the insights, activities, materials and strategies explored by teachers in their research. Through the chapters in the second section, we hope that teacher’s understandings of their experiences can be shared with readers – teachers who may in turn be encouraged to develop their own inquiry into their practice, and researchers who may be encouraged to develop new ways of approaching their own research and new ways of articulating their theoretical concerns.

Denise E Murray

References

- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edge, J. (2001). *Action research: Case studies in TESOL series*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher research: From inquiry to understanding*. Pacific Grove, CA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Introduction

Employability, or generic skills,¹ are the general skills needed by virtually any employee in any workplace. They are not specific to a particular industry and are greatly valued and highly prized in the job market. There has been much discussion of their importance, not only for industry but also for other aspects of life. However, there is still some confusion about exactly what these skills are, and how they can best be incorporated into language programs designed to prepare migrants² for employment in their new country of residence.

An important driver behind the definition of these skills in Australia and elsewhere has been the need for industry to remain competitive in a globalising and increasingly de-regulated marketplace. This has ensured that discussion has remained relevant to the needs of industry and vocational education. However, many of the documents and texts on the topic have focused primarily on the younger adult who may have had little prior workplace experience and is typically assumed to be a native speaker of English.

In this volume, there is a focus on adult learners of all ages who have another language and cultural background and who may or may not have specific workplace experiences in another language and culture, but are developing employability skills through the medium of English as a second (or third or fourth) language in a culture in which they have arrived as adults. In particular, I look at some of the cultural issues surrounding the employability skills of communication and teamwork.

Generic skills in communication and teamwork are especially problematic for job seekers and employees from other language and cultural backgrounds as they are frequently assumed to be relatively self evident and simply in need of practice rather than illustration, exploration and explication. Yet the exact way in which these skills are actually understood and practised in daily life is not universal across cultures, that is, not all cultures have the same understanding about what is clear or polite communication or how you 'do' teamwork. So, although those who have grown up in a particular community may share norms on what good communication or good teamwork is, those who have not grown up in this community do not necessarily share these norms. They may therefore have great difficulty in recognising them and learning how to do them in English. Because native speakers of any language do not realise that such skills are different in different cultures, they may just assume that they are 'natural' and that we therefore all do them in the same way. This means that they often remain underspecified in texts designed to help job seekers, and this leaves considerable onus on the teacher or trainer to unpack for learners exactly what the skills entail.

Typically, such texts take a mono-cultural view – the focus tends to be on practice activities through which communication and teamwork skills are assumed to evolve organically. This does not give the specific, targeted insight and practice needed by migrants who, as yet, have little experience or knowledge of how such goals are accomplished through English in an Australian (or British or Canadian etc) workplace. As a result, these migrants often find they lack some of the vital language and culture-specific understandings and tools they need for success.

Australian workplaces are increasingly multicultural and are at the cutting edge of hybrid and pluralistic work and management approaches (Cope and Kalantzis 1995). This underlines how important it is for all kinds of workers to develop an intercultural sensitivity and competence that will enable them to communicate successfully with

those from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This said, however, English is still the dominant medium of communication in the Australian workplace and communication difficulties are still most often reported in terms of English, even in areas of high migration (Lotherington and Norng 1999). Success at work still often depends on being able to negotiate fairly subtle aspects of communication in English.

While current definitions of employability skills allow a general understanding of the kinds of skills that are useful, the detail of how they are actually performed is lacking. For those who have considerable experience in a language and culture (in this case English in Australia), this is not as serious as they have reserves of experience to draw on. Those who are relatively new to a culture, however, do not; and will rely much more heavily on specific support from their teachers. This volume is designed to help teachers to provide that support through research-based insights into these employability skills and what they might look like in an Australian workplace.

Research context

This volume draws on research conducted in two projects involving teachers and students of the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). The AMEP is a national program which has provided English language instruction for newly-arrived migrants to Australia for over fifty years. Migrants from language backgrounds other than English who do not have functional English are entitled to between 510 to 910 hours of English language instruction, depending on their background and circumstances. The program is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and delivered nationally through state and territory organisations at various centres across Australia as well as through distance learning programs, home tutor schemes and independent learning centres

The AMEP uses a competency based curriculum framework, the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) at three levels – I, II, and III (NSW AMES 2003). The curriculum framework also includes special courses for those with low levels, or interrupted, prior schooling.

Entry levels are roughly as follows:

Pre-CSWE	pre-beginner
CSWE I	beginner
CSWE II	post-beginner
CSWE III	intermediate
CSWE IV	advanced ³

While the majority of learners in the AMEP are in the lower levels (CSWE I and II), the focus in this book is on intermediate level learners at CSWE III level who may have already studied English before their arrival, but who are still at basic survival level and need further help with their language as they prepare for employment in Australia.

The CSWE curriculum is text-based (Feez 1998), and achievement is assessed through the successful completion of learning outcomes in four macro-skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) at each of the levels. These learning outcomes are competency-based and relate to the skills that learners need to acquire as they prepare to settle, work and study in a new country (NSW AMES 2003). For example,

at CSWE III, a learning outcome might be ‘Can provide a spoken explanation’ or ‘Can negotiate a complex problematic spoken exchange’.

The learners in the AMEP come from very diverse language and cultural backgrounds under a number of different schemes, including humanitarian and family reunion. They range in age from young adults to mature senior citizens, and come from varied educational and social backgrounds – some have tertiary education, while others have no experience of schooling at all. In 2004–5, for example, the AMEP provided tuition to over 36 000 learners from 207 language backgrounds, most of whom were between the ages of 19 and 45. The major countries of origin were China, Sudan, Vietnam, Iraq (DIAC n.d.).

The projects

The research in this volume was drawn from two projects conducted by the AMEP Research Centre and providers of the AMEP under the Special Research Projects Program. Both the Research Centre and the research program are funded by the Commonwealth Government of Australia to provide research support to the AMEP and to providers of the program. Both projects were designed to focus on the language and cultural needs of learners preparing to enter the workforce in Australia.

The first project, *Employability skills for professional workers*,⁴ explored the employment-related needs and experiences of AMEP learners who had completed CSWE III and found white-collar work in Australia’s capital city, Canberra. The aim of this project was to improve program delivery by identifying the particular skills and knowledge that helped project participants get and keep their jobs. The project also investigated the main areas of difficulty experienced in the workplace. Insights from this project inform discussion in Section 1 of this volume.

The aims of the second project, the *Communication skills project*, were to understand the language learning needs of intermediate level learners (CSWE III) preparing to seek employment. In particular, we wanted to gain insight into how routine workplace interactions might be conducted in the workplace and into what the employability skills of communication and teamwork might look like in action and how they related to CSWE learning outcomes at this level.

Two teachers involved in the project, Terry Griffin and Jenny Guilfoyle, developed sample materials and teaching approaches to help learners become better acquainted with typical language use in a range of work roles. The materials present typical workplace situations and focus on the way language is used between employees and their supervisors and among colleagues.

In order to raise awareness of generic employability skills issues and how they might be tackled by teachers in the classroom, as many teachers as possible were involved in the project. The insights and outcomes from this project form the basis of Section 3 of this volume.

Structure

Section 1 of this volume covers some of the teaching and learning background of employability skills. The focus is on the needs of speakers of English from other language backgrounds.

Chapter 1 looks in detail at the nature of employability skills and briefly traces their development in Australia. Also outlined are the developments in vocational

training and how it has tried to address industry's need for workplace training in employability and other skills.

Highlighted in Chapter 2 is the inadequacy of current descriptions of communication skills for adult learners who have developed such skills in other cultures and through another language, but who have little experience of Australian workplaces. It is argued that many of the features of communication skills are culture specific, and therefore need to be highlighted explicitly for those who have little experience of that culture. This chapter draws on the findings from *Employability skills for skilled/professional workers*.

Issues related to the learning and teaching of employability skills are outlined in Chapter 3 and these issues explain the teaching approach taken in this volume. This raises my argument that we should all take responsibility for clear and harmonious communication across cultures, whatever our language and culture background.

Section 2 of this volume, classroom perspectives, draws on the *Communication skills project*. In this section I illustrate how the teachers involved in the project gathered data to develop classroom materials. These materials focus more explicitly on communication skills to help learners understand the mechanics of native speaker communication in workplace situations.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology used in the project and explains the reasoning behind it. In Chapters 5 to 8, sample models and activities are provided together with a rationale and explanation of the features selected for focus. These materials can be tried out in the classroom in conjunction with the accompanying CD and may be viewed in two ways: as teaching materials, or as examples of the types of skills, activities and materials that can be developed to address the needs highlighted in this volume.

Section 3 reflects on how the insights from the projects reported here have highlighted the inexplicit and mono-cultural treatment of communication skills in the employability skills framework. At a practical level it considers how we can equip learners to become communication skill investigators in their own right. The section also looks forward to the increasingly multicultural and globalised workplace of the future to argue for a more sensitive cross-cultural and intercultural approach to the skilling of the workforce, whatever their language and cultural background.

Notes

- 1 While these two terms cover roughly the same skill sets (see Chapter 1) and were both current at the time of research reported here, the term 'employability skills' is now preferred by the Australian Commonwealth government and will be used throughout this volume.
- 2 In Australia, the term 'migrant' is more commonly used than the term 'immigrant'.
- 3 This level is offered outside the AMEP.
- 4 This project was conducted by the AMEP, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT). Particular thanks to Margarethe de Riva O'Phelan and Noni Keys.

References

- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (1995). *Making diversity work: The changing cultures of*

Australian workplaces. Haymarket, NSW: NLLIA Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture, James Cook University of North Queensland and University of Technology Sydney.

DIAC. (nd). *What is AMEP?* Retrieved August 22, 2007, from <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/learn-english/what/what2.htm>.

Feez, S. (1998). *Text-based syllabus design*. Sydney: NCELTR.

Lotherington, H., & Norng, S. (1999). Literacy and Language Expectations of Migrant Factory Workers in Suburban Melbourne. *Australian Language Matters*, 7(1), 5, 11.

NSW AMES. (2003). *Certificate III in Spoken and Written English* (4th ed.). Surry Hills, NSW.

Section 1

Background



Chapter 1

The nature of employability skills

As industry becomes increasingly globalised and deregulated, workplaces have been changing, not only in Australia but also worldwide. In Australia, the skills demanded by these changed conditions have been the subject of a number of reports in the last fifteen years and these have fed into developments in post-compulsory training. In this chapter, I look briefly at how these trends have influenced views of the kinds of generic employability skills that migrants are expected to have if they are to be successful in gaining and prospering in employment.

Training in vocational skills relevant to employment is offered in Australia through Vocational Education and Training (VET) within a unified framework of national qualifications called the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). This is a nationally recognised framework through which comparable qualifications are offered in vocational skills in a range of industries at up to six levels. These qualifications are competency-based and delivered through training packages and accredited courses at technical and further education colleges (TAFEs), private and community training providers and secondary schools across Australia under the auspices of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)⁵. It is through these qualifications that the skills considered to be vital to industry are taught and assessed.

Employability skills – those skills considered to be necessary whatever the industry or workplace – have been defined and labelled differently at different times in different countries and contexts. They have been called ‘core’ or ‘key’ skills in the United Kingdom, ‘workplace competencies’ in the United States, ‘essential skills’ in Canada, and ‘key competencies’, ‘generic skills’ or ‘employability skills’ in Australia. They include a range of general skills applicable across different industries and workplaces which employers appear to agree are as important as, and sometimes more important than, the technical skills demanded by their industry. As we shall see below, a series of reports in Australia have culminated in the adoption by DEST of the label ‘employability skills’.

Despite differences in approach, those working to define key employability skills in Australia, Britain, United States and New Zealand have identified broadly similar areas, and noted communication skills and working with others as of particular importance (Kearns 2001: 15). In their overview of recent research into employability skills in Australia, Gibb and Curtin (2004) found that most definitions share the following six elements:

- Basic or fundamental skills such as literacy, numeracy and using technology
- People related skills, including communication, interpersonal, teamwork, and customer service skills
- Thinking skills, such as collecting and organising information, problem solving, planning, learning to learn, innovation and creativity, and systems thinking
- Personal skills and attributes, such as being responsible, resourceful, flexible, able to manage time effectively

- Business skills, such as innovation and enterprise
- Community skills.

(adapted from Gibb and Curtin 2004: 8).

In this chapter, I briefly chart the refinement in Australia of what such key employability skills might include and how they can be incorporated into vocational training for all Australians, including migrants whose first language is not English. I focus in particular on the skills of communication and teamwork, since these will be a primary concern in the remainder of the volume.

The development of employability skills in Australia

In Australia, interest in the set of skills that all employees might need in order to be successful in their job, regardless of the industry in which they work, first emerged in two reviews of quality in education, the Karmel report in 1985 and the Finn Review Committee report in 1991. The Karmel report from the Quality of Education Review Committee (1985) noted the need to improve students' general competencies and recommended that compulsory education should prepare students for conditions in contemporary workplaces. A later report in 1991 by the Finn Review Committee, noted that the changing circumstances of industry in Australia demanded a multi-skilled and adaptable workforce and suggested six key areas of competence. Crucially, these included 'cultural understanding' as an area of competence separate from language and communication.

These initiatives were followed up in 1992 by a report from the Mayer Committee which consulted widely and identified seven key generic competencies regarded as essential for employment. These *key competencies* were seen as 'essential for effective participation in the emerging patterns of work and work organisation' and focusing on 'the capacity to apply knowledge and skills in an integrated way in work situations' (Mayer Committee 1992: 7). They were seen as relevant to work at entry level across a range of industries and workplaces and were also considered to be essential for study and adult life in general. Cultural understanding was not included as a key competency.

At the same time, other countries were developing their own taxonomies of similar skills and the comparison in the following table gives some idea of the similarities in these skills identified in other English speaking countries. The same broad areas of skill were being identified as 'generic', although there are some overlap and differences in nomenclature. For example, while the Mayer key competencies include 'Collecting, analysing and organising information', some of these skills are covered in the British NVQ listing of core skills under the more general heading of 'Communication'. Intercultural issues are not separately identified except in terms of 'Foreign language' and reference to the competency of 'cultural understanding' which does not feature in the final list of employability skills eventually adopted for use in Australia (see following page).

There were also some differences between the approaches taken in different countries. In particular, while Canada and the United States took a broad-based view which included personal qualities, the Mayer Committee opted for a conservative approach. In line with competency-based approaches to workplace skills in the VET

sector in Australia, only those skills regarded as both learnable and assessable were included in the key competencies, so that personal attributes and cultural understanding were not incorporated (see Kearns 2001, and Curtis 2004 for further discussion).

Generic skills across English-speaking countries

Australia (Mayer Key Competencies)	United Kingdom (NCVQ) core skills	Canada employability skills profile	United States (SCANS) workplace know-how
Collecting, analysing and organising information	Communication	Thinking skills	Information Foundation skills: basic skills
Communicating ideas and information	Communication Personal skills: improving own performance and learning	Communication skills	Information Foundation skills: basic skills
Planning and organising activities	Personal skills: improving own performance and learning	Responsibility skills Thinking skills	Resources Foundation skills: personal qualities
Working with others and in teams	Personal skills: working with others	Positive attitudes and behaviour Work with others Adaptability	Interpersonal skills
Using mathematical ideas and techniques	Numeracy: application of number	Understand and solve problems using mathematics	Foundation skills: basic skills
Solving problems	Problem solving	Problem-solving and decision- making skills Learning skills	Foundation skills: thinking
Using technology	Information technology	Use technology Communication skills	Technology Systems
Post-Mayer addition: Cultural understandings	Modern foreign language	Manage information Use numbers Work safely	Participate in projects and tasks

(ACCI/BCA 2002: 4)

As noted above, one regrettable omission from the Mayer listing of competencies is that related to cultural understanding. Although this omission was criticised by the Australian Educational Council and Minister's of Vocational Education Employment and Training (MOVEET) in 1993, and by a National Languages and Literacy of

Australia (NLLIA) report in 1994, consensus proved too difficult to reach on this eighth key competency. In the July meeting of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA),⁶ it was decided to cease work on defining the competency due to what Wyatt-Smith and Dooley (1997: 219) refer to as ‘an absence of shared vision at national policy level’. The competency was not included in the listing of employability skills provided in the subsequent influential Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia report (ACCI/BCA 2002). Given the multicultural nature of the Australian population, and increasing globalisation of industry in general, this seems to have been an opportunity lost to formally recognise the diversity of our workforce as an asset and take on more overtly the communicative challenges that come with it.

The authors of the ACCI/BCA report (2002) surveyed employers in both small and medium sized workplaces in a wide range of industries on the nature of the skills that they saw as crucial for employability. General skills that were widely applicable across industries were differentiated from those that were more technical or job-specific, and these employability skills were defined as:

skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions. (ACCI/BCA 2002: 3)

Building on the work of the Mayer Committee, the ACCI/BCA report expanded the notion of key competencies and proposed the Employability Skills Framework. The authors reported a strong feeling among employers that personal attributes were crucial in the modern workplace, and so these were also included in their framework. Personal attributes are described in the report as ‘non skill-based behaviours and attitudes that employers felt were as important as the employability skills and other technical and job-specific skills’ (p 36). The report challenges the educational system to respond to this need by finding ways of assessing and teaching them (p 38).

The following attributes were included in the framework:

Personal attributes that contribute to overall employability

- Loyalty
- Commitment
- Honesty and integrity
- Reliability
- Personal presentation
- Commonsense
- Positive self-esteem
- Sense of humour
- Balanced attitude to work and home life
- Enthusiasm
- Ability to deal with pressure

- Motivation
- Adaptability

(ACCI/BCA 2002: 8)

Attributes are a controversial area since, as the ACCI/BCA report makes clear, they are much appreciated and sought after by industry and yet they do not easily fit into competency-based approaches to skills development and assessment. However, relevant to the concerns of this book, it is often through language and communication-related behaviours that attributes of this kind are identified. A ‘sense of humour’ may be communicated (and understood) through language, and ‘honesty’ and ‘integrity’ are often judged on the basis of behaviours, such as eye contact and speaking out. These skills are very closely related to communication skills and vary across cultures.

The ACCI/BCA report made use of the broader term ‘skill’ rather than the term ‘competency’, arguing that this was more in line with standard industry usage. Skills were defined as ‘the learned capacity of the individual’ (p 36). They are broadly similar to, but not identical to, the Mayer key competencies. The key skills seen as critical for employability across a broad range of industries were broken down into different elements, or facets⁷, with the understanding that the mix and relative weighting of these would vary from industry to industry and workplace to workplace. The level of sophistication required would also change with the requirements of jobs at different levels. The report suggested the framework could be used by employers as a basis for job descriptions, recruitment and selection and on-the-job training, as well as in the development of training curricula and packages (ACCI/BCA 2002: 36).

The key employability skills are listed below. (Refer to Appendix at the end of this chapter for a full list of employability skills and a description of their different facets).

Employability skills

- Communication that contributes to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- Teamwork that contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes
- Problem solving that contributes to productive outcomes
- Initiative and enterprise that contribute to innovative outcomes
- Planning and organising that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- Self-management that contributes to employee satisfaction and growth
- Learning that contributes to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- Technology that contributes to effective execution of tasks

In May 2005, the National Training Quality Council (NTQC⁸) endorsed this approach. It recommended the incorporation of employability skills into training packages and the industry skills councils⁹ have been reviewing existing packages. However, as the *Training package development handbook* makes clear (DEST 2005: 163),

the set of employability skills adopted for use in Australia does not include the personal attributes identified in the ACCI/BCA (2002) report.

The importance of employability skills

There is widespread agreement employability skills are crucial, whatever the industry or business organisation. Both research on the impact of employability skills on businesses and on the views of employers suggest that they have a huge effect on business performance (Kearns 2001: 64–71). Responses to the *Employability Skills Framework* from the 150 employers surveyed in the ACCI/BCA (2002) report indicated that most supported the overall concept of the framework, and even that they may prefer to engage an employee with the requisite employability skills and ensure the requisite technical skills through training after employment. The climate in which an employee could concentrate on developing only their technical skills has gone, and other, more generic skills, such as the ability to communicate successfully with customers or co-workers, are essential. Both technical, industry-specific and generic ‘employability’ skills are needed.

However, these more generic skills do not always receive the attention they deserve during training. A national survey of 25 senior managers and teachers, and 755 students in nine TAFE colleges examined how such skills were valued and taught. The study found that, while teachers and managers did not necessarily agree on a definition of generic skills, most understood the concept and felt that they were very important for students. However, the study also found that students were often more focused on acquiring technical skills, that is, in acquiring what they considered to be the core skills of the function they were undertaking in the industry. When asked to rate the generic skills they considered most important, both teachers and students particularly valued communication skills (spoken and written) as well as teamwork (Callan 2003). As these can present particular challenges for adults from other language and cultural backgrounds, they are considered in more detail in the following section.

The employability skills of communication and teamwork

Communication and teamwork skills were seen as absolutely critical to enterprise performance in the industry responses included in the ACCI/BCA (2002) report. Not surprisingly, the report identified some overlap between them. Employers saw communication as a two way process. They identified sophisticated skills involving the ability to empathise, negotiate and use languages other than English as relevant to both entry level positions and to the existing workforce. The particular mix of skills, however, was seen as varying from industry to industry and role to role.

Industry representatives stressed the importance of being able to interact successfully with a wide range of people for the harmonious and efficient running of the workplace in general, and for customer service in particular. Listening skills were also stressed as important aspects of customer service or receiving feedback. Teamwork was seen as vital for employees to respond flexibly to structural change in increasingly complex workplaces that value multi-skilling more highly than an employee working alone.

The following are the elements of communication and teamwork specified in the report:

Skill	Element
Communication that contributes to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening and understanding • Speaking clearly and directly • Writing to the needs of the audience • Negotiating responsively • Reading independently • Empathising • Using numeracy effectively • Understanding the needs of internal and external customers • Persuading effectively • Establishing and using networks • Being assertive • Sharing information • Speaking and writing in languages other than English
Teamwork that contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion • Working as an individual and as a member of a team • Knowing how to define a role as part of a team • Applying teamwork skills to a range of situations, eg futures planning, crisis problem solving • Identifying the strengths of team members • Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback

(ACCI/BCC 2002: 8)

Defining and describing employability skills

While employers appear to agree on the importance of developing employability skills, until recently the specification of the exact nature of these skills has proved rather more problematic, both at a conceptual and a practical level. Callan's (2003) study found that teachers had no agreed upon definition of what employability skills actually are and felt the content and assessment outcomes of the employability skills needed to be more clearly specified (pp 55–64). Assessment processes and procedures provide an important way of clarifying the skills targeted by training. They also make providers and employers aware of the exact nature and scope of these skills and give feedback to learners (Curtis and Denton 2003). However, there first needs to be a clear definition of what is being assessed, as well as clear performance criteria and evidence guides (Clayton et al 2003).

To address this issue, DEST published the *Training package development handbook* in October 2005. Chapter 5 of the handbook details the nature of employability skills, how they relate to the Mayer key competencies, and how they can be taught and assessed. The authors make it clear that these skills must be 'front and centre' (p 160) of package development and that they should be embedded in the content of the various units of competency and qualifications rather than separate to them. Since the particular set of employability skills relating to each industry will be different, they must be described through consultation with representatives from the relevant industry, and they must be made sufficiently explicit so that trainers and others can identify and

unpack them for learners. To help them do this, a range of sample tools is included in the handbook, together with examples.

This process is logical and context sensitive in that it allows for a functional analysis by industry representatives of the employability skills of each function in that industry. This forms the basis of an Employability Skills Statement. The skills identified in these statements are then mapped against the Employability Skills Framework, embedded into training packages, checked by industry and then summarised in an Employability Skills Summary (DEST 2004: 171). In this way, skills relevant to particular functions are identified, and industry is closely involved to ensure they are relevant.

However, there seems to be a basic assumption that we all understand how to ‘do’ the communication skills identified through this process. In other words, although it is acknowledged that the mix and nature of the skills will vary from context to context, there is still little specific information on the mechanics of exactly how we use the facets to achieve good communication and teamwork. It is to this issue and the difficulties that it raises for newly arrived adult migrants that I turn in the following chapter.

Notes

- 5 Until June 2005 this was the responsibility of The Australian National Training Authority.
- 6 MCEETYA is a forum of state, territory, federal and New Zealand ministers in the areas of employment, education, training and youth affairs which oversees policy development and coordination in these areas at the national level.
- 7 The original term ‘elements’ was changed to ‘facets’ to fit in with the terminology used in competency-based training (DEST 2005: 163).
- 8 This council was replaced in December 2005 by the National Quality Council (NQC) which continues much of its work. The NQC is a Committee of the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education, and oversees quality assurance to ensure consistency in the way in which the Australian Quality Training Framework standards are applied in the sector.
- 9 Industry Skills Councils provide industry-specific information to the Vocational Education and Training sector about training requirements in order to support the development, implementation and continuous improvement of quality nationally recognised training products and services, including Training Packages.

References

- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (ACCI/BCA). (2002). *Employability skills for the future*. Canberra: DEST.
- Callan, V. (2003). *Generic skills: Understanding vocational education and training teacher and student attitudes*. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- Clayton, B., Blom, K., Meyers, D., & Bateman, A. (2003). *Assessing and certifying generic skills: What is happening in vocational education and training?* Retrieved November 7, 2006, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>

- Curtis, D. (2004). The assessment of generic skills. In J. Gibb (Ed.), 2004. *Generic skills in vocational educational and training*. Adelaide: NCVER.
- Curtis, D., & Denton, R. (2003). *The authentic performance-based assessment of problem-solving*. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- DEST. (2004, December). *Employability Skills. Final Report: Development of a strategy to support the universal recognition and recording of employability skills: A skills portfolio approach*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from <http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/9F3D1FC5-45CD-468E-88D6-97-B9ADE92854/4055/UniversalRecognitionofEmployabilitySkillsProjectFi.pdf>
- DEST. (2005, October). *Training Package Development Handbook*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/Training_Package_Development_Handbook.htm
- DEST Employment Skills website accessed November 7, 2006: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/es/
- Finn Review Committee. (1991). *Young people's participation in post-compulsory education and training: Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Gibb, J., & Curtin, P. (2004). Overview. In J. Gibb (Ed.), *Generic skills in vocational education and training. Research readings*. Adelaide: NCVER.
- Kearns, P. (2001). *Generic skills for the new economy: Review of research*. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- Mayer Committee. (1992). *Key competencies: Report of the Committee to advise the Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training on employment-related key competencies for postcompulsory education and training*. Canberra: Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website accessed November 7, 2006: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- NCVER generic skills publications and projects website accessed November 7, 2006: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/21013.html>
- Quality of Education Review Committee. (1985). *Quality of education in Australia: Report of the Review Committee*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Wyatt-Smith, C., & Dooley, K. (1997). Shaping Australian policy on cultural understandings: Alternative approaches to inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1(1), 267–282.

Appendix 1

The skills and elements included in the Employability Skills Framework

Skill	Element/facet
Communication that contributes to productive and harmonious relation between employees and customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening and understanding • Speaking clearly and directly • Writing to the needs of the audience • Negotiating responsively • Reading independently • Empathising • Using numeracy effectively • Understanding the needs of internal and external customers • Persuading effectively • Establishing and using networks • Being assertive • Sharing information • Speaking and writing in languages other than English
Teamwork that contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion • Working as an individual and as a member of a team • Knowing how to define a role as part of a team • Applying teamwork skills to a range of situations, eg futures planning, crisis problem solving • Identifying the strengths of team members • Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback
Problem solving that contributes to productive outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing creative, innovative solutions • Developing practical solutions • Showing independence and initiative in identifying problems and solving them • Solving problems in teams • Applying a range of strategies to problem-solving • Using mathematics including budgeting and financial management to solve problems • Applying problem-solving strategies across a range of areas • Testing assumptions taking the context of data and circumstances into account • Resolving customer concerns in relation to complex project issues
Initiative and enterprise that contribute to innovative outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to new situations • Developing a strategic, creative, long-term vision • Being creative • Identifying opportunities not obvious to others • Translating ideas into action • Generating a range of options • Initiating innovative solutions
Planning and organising that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing time and priorities – setting timelines, coordinating asks for self and with others • Being resourceful • Taking initiative and making decisions • Adapting resource allocations to cope with contingencies

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing clear project goals and deliverables • Allocating people and other resources to tasks • Planning the use of resources including time management • Participating in continuous improvement and planning processes • Developing a vision and a proactive plan to accompany it • Predicting – weighing up risk, evaluating alternatives and applying evaluation criteria • Collecting, analysing and organising information • Understanding basic business systems and their relationships
<p>Self-management that contributes to employee satisfaction and growth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a personal vision and goals • Evaluating and monitoring own performance • Having knowledge and confidence in own ideas and vision • Articulating own ideas and vision • Taking responsibility
<p>Learning that contributes to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing own learning • Contributing to the learning community at the workplace • Using a range of mediums to learn – mentoring, peer support, networking, information technology (IT), courses • Applying learning to 'technical' issues (eg learning about products) and 'people' issues (eg interpersonal and cultural aspects of work) • Having enthusiasm for ongoing learning • Being willing to learn in any setting – on and off the job • Being open to new ideas and techniques • Being prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills • Acknowledging the need to learn in order to accommodate change
<p>Technology that contributes to effective execution of tasks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a range of basic IT skills • Applying IT as a management tool • Using IT to organise data • Being willing to learn new IT skills • Having the occupational health and safety knowledge to apply technology • Having the appropriate physical capacity

ACCI/BCA (2002: 8)

Chapter 2

Issues for newly arrived adults

As noted in the previous chapter, the employability skills identified in the Employability Skills Framework are seen as crucial for employment and must be incorporated into packages relating to training for all levels and roles in industry. These skills are therefore integral to the different competencies of each certificate at each level of the various industry training qualifications awarded under the AQF (see Chapter 1), and anyone training for employment or advancement in a wide range of industries must now be able to demonstrate that they have them. However, as argued below, the descriptions of these skills are based on the assumption that they are essentially mono-cultural. Although they are construed as ‘generic’ in the sense that they are useful across industries and workplaces, some of them, in particular those relating to communication and teamwork, are fundamentally culture specific.

This poses particular issues for adults arriving in Australia from other language and cultural backgrounds, as their culture-specific nature is scarcely acknowledged in officially sanctioned descriptions of what these ‘generic’ skills entail. Indeed, as will be argued below, details of exactly how good communication and teamwork are achieved are glossed over, leaving descriptions somewhat vague and slippery, even for those who have grown up in Australia. For those who have had their formative interactional experiences in another culture, the problem is amplified because the nuts and bolts of successful and appropriate communication may look very different in different cultures. New arrivals entering the job market face the challenge of not only having English language and literacy skills commensurate with technical demands of the job, but also of understanding how to operate in a new work culture where the norms and expectations relating to good communication and how teams work together may be very different.

This chapter will consider the inadequacy of current descriptions of communication and certain aspects of teamwork skills for adult language learners preparing to enter the workforce in Australia by drawing on the findings of *Project 1: Employability skills for skilled/professional workers*, outlined in the introduction to this volume. I will argue that such skills need to be made very much more explicit for newly-arrived migrants to Australia (or any unfamiliar culture), as adults will draw on reserves of experience they have had in the cultures they have lived in, and these may be very different from the experiences of adults who have grown up in Australia. In Section 2 of this book, I will then consider some ways in which teachers can approach the discovery and learning of knowledge and skills used in communication and teamwork in the Australian context and illustrate these using the activities and materials developed by teachers who participated in the second project, the *Communication skills project*.

The not so ‘generic’ employability skills

As argued in the previous chapter, the ability to communicate effectively in English in the workplace, and to maintain good working relations with clients, colleagues and employers over the longer term is critical not only for gaining qualifications under the AQF, but also for gaining employment and then prospering in the workplace. In order

to communicate and work effectively with others it is crucial to understand how successful communication is actually achieved in that context. This involves not only an understanding of the culture of the workplace and how to fit into the system – such as when it is appropriate to speak up or suggest an innovation and so on (Virgona et al 2003) – but also an appreciation of the wider interactional culture played out in Australian contexts more generally.

Many migrants to Australia have already developed considerable communication and teamwork skills through their workplace experiences in other countries and contexts. Some of these, such as ‘speaking and writing in language other than English’ and ‘using numeracy’ may transfer very easily to an Australian workplace, but some may be accomplished very differently as the tools and strategies involved may vary across language and cultures. Communication and teamwork skills, which depend more on specific interactional experience in English, may be particularly problematic for them. For example, they may be unsure how to ‘show empathy’ or ‘persuade effectively’ in English, even though they are very proficient at such skills in their first language.

Many of our assumptions and understandings about appropriate communication are developed when we are very young, when we learn through our interactions with members of our community what is considered to be appropriate behaviour in a situation, or what one learner described as ‘the secret rules of speaking’ (Ochs 1988, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig 2001; Yates 2004). These secret rules relate not to grammar or the more obvious aspects of language acquisition, but to the less visible realms of how speakers in communities tend to conduct interactions, what communicative styles are favoured, what speaker rights and obligations are, and so on. They draw on deeply-held, and largely unconscious, assumptions, preferences and socio-cultural values that speakers within a community share but which are frequently left inexplicit and unexamined. Since people interact in different ways in different cultures, the ‘rules’ we have learned in our first culture may not be the same as those used in another, and so we may have difficulty recognising them when we operate in a culture we did not grow up in.

This is because we tend to understand current situations in terms of our past experiences. When we have grown up in one culture and then move to another we are likely to take with us the patterns and assumptions relating to appropriate ways of communicating. Thus mature employees who have already developed employability skills of communication in another workplace culture will bring these understandings and assumptions with them, and these are likely to act as a prism through which interactions in Australian contexts are viewed and (mis)interpreted.

Newcomers, therefore, even those with extensive vocabularies and high levels of grammatical proficiency, may find they do not understand the ‘rules’ by which interactions are conducted. Because their new experiences are filtered through sets of assumptions and expectations that belong to another culture, it is difficult for them to acquire the rules of the ‘new’ culture. They may become aware that things are done differently, but they are unsure how this is actually played out. This tendency to transfer expectations and assumptions about interactive style, coupled with an incomplete grasp of the interactive conventions and expectations that are more usual in their new workplace, may interfere with their ability to communicate effectively with employers, team members and other colleagues. Since what may be considered a perfectly acceptable usage in one culture may have a completely different effect in

English, serious short-term and long-term misunderstandings can arise quite inadvertently. This can be particularly dangerous in workplace interactions, where, under the pressure of work, we can often react positively or negatively to the 'little things' or micro-elements about the way someone talks without even realising it.

A recent example that occurred in a governmental department might serve as an illustration of what can go wrong.

Example – communication gone wrong

Cai Neng¹⁰, an employee in Tasmania with a Chinese background was working on a report. She received an email from her boss asking to see the report 'this arvo' and suggesting that she (Cai Neng) 'might like to discuss it' with person X beforehand. Several days later, the boss still had not received the report, and person X had not been consulted. What had gone wrong here?

It seems that Cai Neng had not understood the colloquial term 'arvo' (afternoon), nor the Australian tendency to make such shortenings, even in workplace communication which, in other cultures, might take on a more formal tone. Neither had Cai Neng interpreted the indirect request that she 'might like to' discuss the report with X as the direct instruction that it was. Cai Neng had not understood that a boss can use a form that looks like a suggestion when the force intended is that of a request, or, given the fact that this is from a boss to an employee, an order! This kind of non-conventional indirect speech act is very difficult for non-native speakers to accurately interpret (Cook and Liddicoat 2002).

Cei Neng had not been aware of two of the 'secret rules' of communication in her workplace:

- 1 'Informal language is okay in emails at work'.
- 2 'Direct instructions from a boss can look like indirect requests (or suggestions or other speech acts)'.

She had probably been guided by the more formal and hierarchical patterns of communication characteristic of workplaces in China (see, for example, Lee-Wong 1993; Yates 2000). She has interpreted her boss's request as a suggestion and thus misinterpreted the intended force, a mistake that appears to be common among English speakers whose first language is Chinese (Cook and Liddicoat 2002).

Politeness is the root of the issue in this example. While logic might dictate that human beings be as direct as possible in the way they communicate in all situations in order to minimise misunderstanding, politeness theory would argue that we deviate from this general principle in order to save face, ours or our interlocutor's (see, for example, Lakoff 1973; Brown and Levinson 1987). Although this may be universal to all human communication, how direct we are in different situations is culturally variable.

Various studies suggest that Australians (in the cities at least) tend to make their requests more indirect than they do in other cultures (Blum-Kulka and House 1989;

see discussion Yates 2000). For example, in a workplace in Beijing, it may be normal and expected (preferred, even) for a white-collar manager to give orders to their employees in an unambiguously direct way. In Australia, however, this is not necessarily so. In her study of workplace communication in the Melbourne office of a French company, Beal found that French employees also found the indirect instructions from Australians in authority confusing (Beal 1990, 1994). Adherence to such tacit ‘secret rules’ of politeness underpin a community’s definition of appropriate or successful communication.

However, since the conventions and expectations underlying the way language is used in a culture are frequently less visible, even to native speakers, they frequently receive less attention in language programs and are therefore less readily taught and learned than the rules of the language itself.

So, although advanced users of English as a second language may be very proficient at particular facets of communication, such as, ‘speaking clearly and directly’, they may find that these skills are interpreted and accomplished in subtly different ways in English. How direct is ‘direct’, and how is such directness achieved in a way that is clear but not offensive? Even fairly proficient learners may find that they do not understand how such communicative goals are effectively achieved in Australian contexts, and may not have a complete repertoire of devices for accomplishing them. Learners therefore need the opportunity to address aspects of employability skills explicitly as part of their English language learning and to reflect on how these skills might be done differently in different cultures.

This mismatch in experience and understanding about how communicative goals are achieved is all the more dangerous and insidious because it is largely invisible to both parties in an interaction. If we make a mistake with grammar, or fail to find the right word for what we want to say, it is often obvious that there is a language related problem and we can compensate by asking questions, reformulating what we want to say and so on. However, if an adult colleague or employee makes a request too directly, or, in the opposite case, seems to take forever to get to the point, because they are following the norms of communication that they have brought with them from their previous lives, we may not recognise this as a difficulty of transfer from another culture. There is a real danger that such incidents are simply attributed to the personality or attitude of the speaker – the speaker is seen as ‘rude’ or ‘manipulative’.

If we do not increase awareness of such issues among new arrivals as well as other members of our community, there is the distinct danger that migrants will hit a glass ceiling in their career development and never understand how their interactive style could have contributed to this. Many teachers have encountered bewildered employees who have worked hard but do not seem to progress to positions of greater responsibility. Although there may be many explanations for this, ‘language’ is often cited as the reason. In reality it could be less a matter of linguistic competence and more of understanding and achieving accurate and appropriate communication with others – the language itself is only part of the story.

Employees from other language and culture backgrounds bring a wealth of experience and skills. If they do not fulfil their managerial, technical and other potential we are missing out on a huge resource. In order to avoid this, we must ensure that adult migrants are able to develop their understandings of the communication and teamwork employability skills expected in the workplace. As noted in the previous chapter and discussed below, such skills are, however, currently under-specified: the

‘secret’ rules of communication seem poised to remain secret in the training packages designed to train employees in the communication skills they need for the Australian workplace.

Current descriptions and assumptions

Designed to supersede previous publications, the *Training package development handbook*¹¹ was published in October 2005. It paved the way for an overhaul of existing packages and provided clear and comprehensive guidelines for what should be included in all approved training packages. The handbook devotes an entire chapter to how employability skills are to be treated in training packages (DEST 2005: 160–250). Drawing on the ACCI/BCA (2002) report in which the employability skills framework was first developed, it lists the eight skills, together with the ‘facets’ identified in the report. Facets are identified to further describe the nature of these skills (refer Appendix 1, Chapter 1 of this volume).

As we saw in Chapter 1, the skills set of ‘communication’ is described as ‘communication that contributes to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers’. It is seen as having the following facets:

- Listening and understanding
- Speaking clearly and directly
- Writing to the needs of the audience
- Negotiating responsively
- Reading independently
- Empathising
- Using numeracy effectively
- Understanding the needs of internal and external customers
- Persuading effectively
- Establishing and using networks
- Being assertive
- Sharing information
- Speaking and writing in languages other than English.

As noted in the previous chapter, while some of the formative work in developing and defining these skill sets clearly and explicitly highlights the important role of culture and communication and understanding across cultures (Mayer Committee 1992; NLLIA 1994 and see discussion Wyatt-Smith and Dooley 1997), it is now absent from the employability skills. The cultural basis of the facets is not explicit, and only the last in the list, ‘speaking and writing in languages other than English’ alludes to cross-cultural issues.

As the Handbook makes clear, while the skills themselves can be seen as consistent across industries, the facets are to be regarded as ‘examples only based on the information provided by the employers surveyed’ [in the ACCI/BCA report]. The role of industry representatives in determining the ‘unique set and mix of facets’ for every

qualification in a training package is seen as crucial (DEST 2005: 163), as the particular mix of facets regarded as important in any specific industry will vary.

The chapter in the Handbook on generic employability skills provides descriptions and examples of how these skills can be identified, described and incorporated into units of competency and qualifications for different functions in different industries. A range of tools is provided in the appendixes of the handbook for this purpose. These include examples, blank templates to help analyse the generic skills needed for particular functions, checklists, tools for developing employability skills statements for a qualification, tools for mapping employability skills onto a qualification or set of skills, and even a thesaurus of terms that can be used to describe employability skills.

For example, the thesaurus provided in Tool 6 in the Handbook (pp 213–226), offers ‘a list of terms’ which ‘may be valuable when developing units’ (p 213). In fact, this tool provides only the most general of descriptors (for example, ‘empathise with others’, ‘apply basic communication skills’, p 214), and falls short of providing details of what the skills might actually look like in practice. The illustrated example of a completed Employability Skills Statement provided in Tool 8 of the Handbook is similarly unhelpful, except at the most basic level. It does provide descriptions of the tasks to be done, but not on *how* they are to be done.

For example, the facet ‘negotiating responsively’ is specified for the function of a freight forwarding operator studying for Certificate III in Transport and Distribution (Administration) as:

- Negotiate order of pick ups, spot rate, storage requirements, etc
- Negotiate rates, prices and allocations with customers
- Negotiate cost of job with contract drivers.

(DEST 2005: 238)

As we can see from this illustration, while such tools are no doubt useful in helping to generate general descriptions of the kinds of behaviours that industry representatives see as desirable, they operate at a level of generality in which the exact nature of communication skills remains underspecified. They describe ‘what’ but do not provide any information on ‘how’.

For adults from another language and cultural background, however, the devil really *is* in the detail. For example, what exactly is it that we do when we ‘negotiate’? What do we do to be ‘persuasive’ or ‘assertive’ or ‘empathise’ with someone? It may be possible (albeit inefficient) for native speakers to draw on their experience of communicating in a culture in general and, from this, work out how to achieve successful communication in a more specific context. But adult migrants who have only recently arrived in Australia are not able to do this as they have no history of interacting in Australia. They will not necessarily share the same repertoire of how communication is achieved successfully. In the absence of more specific insight into the cultural and linguistic underpinnings of a context, migrants will draw on the only knowledge that they have – their own linguistic and cultural heritage. This may lead them seriously astray, putting them at a disadvantage in the job market.

However, recommended pedagogical approaches to employability skills appear to assume they can be acquired through experience and practice, as if by osmosis. Smith and Comyn (2003), for example, note that novice workers in Australia tend to develop

their employability skills through ‘proactive communication and trying to make a good impression’. They advance the view that if employees do not manage to develop their communication skills, it is because they have failed to make work a priority in their lives. The assumption here is that all workers have the basic tools and information with which to do this.

Materials designed to develop these skills also seem to assume that learners can draw on understandings they have within them (see for example, Aspire Training & Consulting 2003, and see also discussion in Chapter 3 of this volume). While this may be so for younger workers who have grown up in Australia, the situation for adult migrants will be very different, and it can be particularly important in white-collar and other contexts where communication is central to success. A recent project in Canberra has highlighted some of these issues, as we see in the next Section.

The needs of new arrivals

The project *Employability skills for skilled/professional workers* investigated the experiences of 14 tertiary educated learners who went into white-collar employment in Canberra, Australia from their studies at Certificate III level (low intermediate) in the AMEP.

The objectives of the project were to:

- track the employment pathway of AMEP students who had completed CSWE III and were currently in skilled/professional jobs in Australia
- identify the particular skills and knowledge that assisted them to get and keep their jobs
- identify the main areas of difficulty experienced in the workplace
- reflect on any implications of these for program delivery.

Five teachers were involved. Potential participants were identified, and 14 agreed to participate: 10 females and 4 males from a range of language backgrounds in South America, Central Europe and Asia. All had tertiary qualifications, and most had done further training in Australia. Most were between 31 and 40 years old.

All 14 students responded to a questionnaire designed to elicit details of key problems and obstacles they had encountered in their employment and another investigating what further study they had undertaken. A further questionnaire investigating the usefulness of specific components of their English language course was completed by those participants who had undertaken these components. The focus here was on job-seeking skills and cross-cultural awareness. The participants were given the opportunity to expand on their responses in follow-up semi-structured telephone interviews.

The findings of the project highlighted some of the cultural assumptions and micro-facets of communication that migrants looking for white-collar employment felt that they wanted to know more about, in particular, the cultural knowledge and values underpinning both the job-seeking process (ie making an application, going for interview) and communication in workplace.

For example:

- the cultural values and expectations that lie behind job applications and the interview process, such as the personal qualities that an interviewer may be looking for, or the necessity of ‘selling yourself’ and how to do this
- the relationship between what is written in a job application and what is said at the interview.

Many learners in the study indicated the importance to them of understanding how to communicate in the workplace. They specifically indicated a need for insight into:

- the value placed on signalling (or not signalling) relative rank
- the role of informality and informal communication at work
- the individualistic nature of the Australian workplace
- the rights and responsibilities of an employee in the workplace
- how to access help if needed.

Specifically, they seemed to need to know more about the ‘secret rules’ regarding how to communicate with those at different levels of the hierarchy, how to interact informally and on what topics. Like Cai Neng in the example given above, they experienced difficulty in understanding things said to them in an informal way and in working out what is a crucial instruction or piece of information. The learners reported being uncertain about how and when to use formal and informal language, and how to ‘do’ casual conversation and email. The giving and interpretation of instructions and directives in the workplace, including how to approach and soften requests and how to use persuasion, also attracted comment. These aspects of communication skills are clearly important both to employers and to those preparing for the workplace.

Focusing on the facets of communication

As discussed above, although native speakers of English may be only peripherally aware of what it is they actually do when they accomplish everyday acts of communication, migrants need to have access to this information in order to do it successfully. Here insights from the study of pragmatics in cross-cultural communication, that is, of the way we use language to make meaning in a context, is useful in clarifying how communication works.

Several projects have investigated cross-cultural communication in Australian workplaces. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Pauwel and her colleagues undertook a series of investigations into language and the professions through the National Centre for Community Languages and the Professions (Pauwels 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995). The insights from this work are oriented primarily towards helping native English speakers of English work in, or train for, communication with speakers from other language backgrounds in health and legal settings. These studies helped to raise the profile of cross-cultural communication in Australia by raising awareness of the sociocultural issues that can arise in these settings and the strategies that professionals can use to address them. However, apart from general overviews of factors in cross cultural pragmatics (Clyne and Platt 1989, 1991, 1992) they did not explore in great detail how sociocultural and pragmlinguistic factors interact, or are enacted, in the language used in specific situations.

Beal (1990, 1992, 1994) conducted a study of a single workplace in Melbourne where French and Australian white-collar workers experienced both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic differences. Her work helped to highlight how these factors could combine to undermine successful long term workplace communication and provided some insights into the specific difficulties that might arise between speakers from French and Australian backgrounds.

White-collar interactions at work, mostly between pairs of advanced users of English, were studied in the Communication Tasks in the Professional Workplace project (Willing 1992a, 1992b, 1997). Although the analyses mostly draw on non-native discourse, they offer valuable and specific insights into how communication works in problem-solving between professionals. Some of the comparisons made between native speaker and non-native speaker discourse are very instructive for teacher and learner alike, and have provided the basis for some useful teaching material for migrants preparing to enter the workforce (Hogarth and Burnett 1996). The work on modalisation is particularly relevant to the interpersonal language used in requesting, complaining and negotiating illustrated in the sample materials in Section 2 of this volume (Willing 1992b: 88–95). Willing concludes that even advanced speakers of English use far less modalisation than their native speaker counterparts. This finding is echoed in Yates's comparison of Chinese background and native speaker trainee teachers operating in the classroom (Yates 2000, 2004).

Interactions between speakers of English as a lingua franca in Australia have also been studied by Clyne and colleagues (Clyne 1994). Although the focus here was on interaction between non-native speakers from different cultural backgrounds, this work highlights the multicultural nature of interaction in the workforce and some of the areas where sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic differences come into play.

Interactions at work between speakers of Pakeha, Maori and other backgrounds have been widely studied in a recent project in New Zealand in the Language in the Workplace Project. The project has drawn together a corpus of workplace communication in New Zealand which has also allowed other detailed investigations on how language is used at work, including how power relations and gender are enacted (Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Holmes 2006a), how humour and small talk are used (Holmes 2000, 2006b) and how directives are managed (Newton 2004; Vine 2004). Useful teaching and training materials have also been constructed using the corpus (Stubbe and Brown 2002; Riddiford 2007).

Despite the insights provided by these studies into how language is used at work, teachers are still unsure on how these can be tackled in the classroom (Yates and Wigglesworth 2005) and some recent studies have shown that intermediate learners (Certificate III level) in the AMEP still do not use many of the devices used by native speakers in negotiating requests (Yates 2007; Wigglesworth and Yates forthcoming). As the findings from the *Employability skills for skilled/professional workers* project illustrate, learners exiting from the AMEP would benefit from further exploration of these aspects of generic communication skills in order to better understand how communication works in the workplace.

In understanding what can go wrong for speakers of English from other cultures, it is useful to distinguish two different areas of pragmatics: sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics (Thomas 1983).

The term sociopragmatics covers those cultural issues that we need to understand about a situation in order to communicate effectively in it. For example, what roles

and rights a speaker has in a situation, what kind of power relations there are between the speakers, whether what is being asked is a simple thing in that culture or very difficult, what kind of behaviour is expected, and so on.

For example, while it may be quite usual for teachers to ask a male and a female from France to do pair work together in class, this would be an altogether more serious request to students from Saudi Arabia because of the sociopragmatic values in their home culture which do not encourage such intimacy between males and females in public. It would therefore be something we would ask a lot more carefully, if at all. Another example is the job interview. Although the genre itself may exist in many cultures, the sociopragmatic assumptions and understandings around how it is performed, the 'secret rules', will differ widely. So migrants may come to Australia with very different understandings about, for example, the implicit meaning of questions such as 'Tell us about yourself' or how appropriate it is to show familiarity or deference, or how far to go in displaying skills or qualifications (O'Grady and Millen 1994).

Pragmalinguistics covers the relationship between language items and the force or effect they have in a context. Pragmalinguistic knowledge, or an understanding of the effect of using particular words or constructions in a context, is crucial if our words are to have the impact that we intend. Because in different languages and cultures, equivalent words may have different impact, there is a danger that we may innocently transfer a construction from our first language into the use of our second although it may not have the same effect. For example, English speakers tend to formulate requests indirectly using the construction 'can you do X', and this is usually considered polite. If they used the parallel construction in Russian, however, they would be interpreted as asking a question about someone's ability to do the action requested, rather than a request to do it (Thomas 1983), because the meaning of the phrase in the two languages is different.

Another example is the way Australians use 'just' as a minimiser to soften their requests and assertions. Even quite advanced learners of English do this considerably less often than native-speakers (Willing 1992a, b; Yates 2000; Wigglesworth and Yates forthcoming). This is unlikely to be because they are not familiar with the word itself, but because they are not aware of its function as a softener, that is, of its pragmalinguistic use (or force) in English. This may be because it either does not have this force, or is used less often with this force, in their first language.

An awareness of both sociopragmatic values and pragmalinguistic possibilities in a language and culture will help migrants to better understand how communication works at work.

Understanding sociopragmatic issues

Sociopragmatic values are of crucial importance in understanding how interaction works in a culture and yet they receive scant attention in language courses. Such values relate to general cultural values and underpin successful communication at work and elsewhere. These may be radically different in different cultures, even if the setting is otherwise similar. For example, the values underpinning a similar interaction (say a request by an employee to take leave) in two cultures may be different. This can mean that we would approach and phrase the same request very differently, even within the same type of company or workplace. While we do not often talk about them, we can see evidence of these sociopragmatic values in the way we approach an interaction. For example, which of the following values do you think best describes communication in your workplace?

Is it more important to ...

- show overt respect to those of higher rank
 - eg by using 'Sir' to address the boss
- wait until asked to give your view
- adopt a formal, 'professional' stance at work
 - eg use formal language

Or is it more usual to ...

- downplay overt hierarchical differences
 - eg by using a first name to address the boss
- suggest new ideas without invitation
- adopt a familiar, friendly stance
 - eg use informal language

Our answers to these questions will vary according to the particular situation we are in and the particular people we are speaking to. However, there are cross-cultural differences. For example, it is more common to use first names without a title when we address bosses, and to make use of informal language, in Australian workplaces than it is in many countries in Asia. If a migrant uses formal language where informal language is expected, this may lead to impressions of aloofness which can contribute to judgments that they do not yet have the communication skills to relate successfully to customers or employers. The reverse situation also has its dangers. If someone uses first names and informal language to a boss in a culture where this is not appropriate, they are likely to be perceived as overly familiar and pushy.

Understanding pragmalinguistic issues

If we are scarcely aware of the sociopragmatic values that underpin our interactive style, we are also generally only marginally aware of the pragmalinguistic resources that we draw on in order to achieve our goals when we interact, and yet these are the building blocks of successful communication and impression management. Even native speakers are rarely able to explain what devices they use to create an impression or get a point across in the way that they intend. For example:

- how long do we pause before answering: for example, is it more polite to leave a long pause or only a short one?
- what is the effect of short markers such as 'well', 'ah', 'oh', 'yeah but', 'yeah no', 'so', 'look', 'okay' when we use them to introduce what we say?
- how do we hedge bad news or criticism to make it more palatable?
- what devices do we use to soften a request?
- what do we do to show that we are listening to and understanding an instruction?

Such aspects of language use vary from language to language and culture to culture. For example, much longer pauses between speakers are tolerated and considered appropriate between speakers in Japan than in France. Listening behaviour, that is, the little words or vocalisations that listeners use when they are not speaking, vary also. Chinese speakers, for example, may use far fewer than do speakers of Japanese, and they use them at different times and places in the talk (Clancy et al 1996).

By focusing explicitly on both the sociopragmatic values that native or expert speakers draw on when they talk to each other, and on the pragmalinguistic devices which constitute the nuts and bolts of how we achieve our communicative ends, teachers can help learners develop their 'generic' skills in communication and teamwork in English.

While there are some teaching materials that address these issues (for example, O'Grady and Millen 1994; Hogarth and Burnett 1995), teachers can target students' needs more specifically by collecting their own samples of communication and analysing them for these micro-elements (as was done in the *Communication skills project*). Learners can then see how an interaction is *actually* conducted, and not how we *think* it should be done. In the following chapter, I explore briefly issues in the learning and teaching of such interpersonal aspects of language use.

Notes

- 10 Pseudonym. My thanks to Marian May for this illustrative anecdote, and to an anonymous reviewer for helping to clarify the issue.
- 11 DEST (2005). *Training package development handbook*. Retrieved November 7, 2006. It is downloadable from: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications/resources/profiles/Training_Package_Development_Handbook.htm

References

- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (ACCI/BCA). (2002). *Employability skills for the future*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Aspire Training & Consulting. (2003). *Fostering generic skills*. Melbourne
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2001). Evaluating the empirical evidence: Grounds for instruction in pragmatics? In K. R. Rose and G. Kasper, (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 13–32). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beal, C. (1990). 'It's All in the Asking': A perspective on problems of cross-cultural communication between native speakers of French and native speakers of Australian English in the workplace. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, Supplement 7*.
- Beal, C. (1992). Did you have a good weekend? or why there is no such thing as a simple question in cross-cultural encounters. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 15(1), 23–52.
- Beal, C. (1994). Keeping the peace: A cross-cultural comparison of questions and requests in Australian English and French. *Multilingua*, 13(1–2), 35–58.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & House, J. (1989). Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behaviour. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clancy, P. M., Thompson, S.A., Suzuki, R., & Tao, H. (1996). The conversational use of reactive tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26, 355–387.

- Clyne, M. G. (1994). *Inter-cultural communication at work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clyne, M., & Platt, J. (1989). In A. Pauwel (Ed.), *Proceedings of the conference on cross-cultural communication in the health professions, Monash University, September 22, 1989*. Melbourne: National Centre for Community Languages in the Professions, Monash University.
- Clyne, M., & Platt, J. (1991). In A. Pauwel (Ed.), *Cross-cultural communication in medical encounters*. Melbourne: Community Languages in the Professions Unit, Language and Society Centre, National Languages Institute of Australia, Monash University.
- Clyne, M., & Platt, J. (1992). In A. Pauwels (Ed.), *Cross-cultural communication in legal settings*. Melbourne: Community Languages in the Professions Unit, Language and Society Centre, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, Monash University.
- Cook, M., & Liddicoat, A. (2002). The development of comprehension in interlanguage pragmatics: The case of request strategies in English. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 25(1), 19–39.
- DEST. (2005, October). *Training package development handbook*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/Training_Package_Development_Handbook.htm
- Hogarth, W., & Burnett, L. (1995). *Talking it through: Teachers' guide and classroom materials*. Sydney: NCELTR.
- Holmes, J. (2000). Talking English from 9 to 5: Challenges for ESL Learners at Work. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 125–140.
- Holmes, J. (2006a). *Gendered talk at work*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Holmes, J. (2006b). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humour and gender in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38(1), 26–50.
- Holmes, J., and Stubbe, M. (2003). *Power and politeness in the workplace*. London: Longman.
- Lakoff, R. T. (1973). The logic of politeness; or minding your p's and q's. *Papers from the ninth regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 292–305).
- Lee-Wong, S. M. (1993). *Requesting in Putonghua: Politeness, culture and forms*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Monash, Melbourne.
- Mayer Committee. (1992). *Key competencies: Report of the Committee to advise the Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training on employment-related key competencies for postcompulsory education and training*. Canberra: Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training.
- NLLIA. (National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia). (1994). *Cultural understandings as the eighth Key Competency. Final report to the Queensland Department of Education and the Queensland Vocational Education, Training and Employment Commission*. Sydney: Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture.
- Newton, J. (2004). Face-threatening talk on the factory floor: Using authentic workplace interactions in language teaching. *Prospect*, 19(1), 47–64.
- Ochs, E. (1988). *Culture and language development: Language acquisition and language*

- socialization in a Samoan village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ochs, E. (1996). Linguistic resources for socializing humanity. In J. J. Gumperz & S. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Grady, C., & Millen, M. (1994). *Finding common ground: Cross-cultural communication strategies for job seekers*. Sydney: NCELTR.
- Pauwel, A. (Ed.). (1989). *Proceedings of the conference on cross-cultural communication in the health professions, Monash University, 22 September, 1989*. Melbourne: National Centre for Community Languages in the Professions, Monash University.
- Pauwel, A. (Ed.). (1991). *Cross-cultural communication in medical encounters*. Melbourne: Community Languages in the Professions Unit, Language and Society Centre, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, Monash University.
- Pauwel, A. (Ed.). (1992). *Cross-cultural communication in legal settings*. Melbourne: Community Languages in the Professions Unit, Language and Society Centre, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, Monash University.
- Pauwel, A. (1994). Applying linguistic insights in intercultural communication to professional training programs: An Australian case study. *Multilingua*, 13(1/2), 195–212.
- Pauwel, A. (1995). *Cross-cultural communication in the health sciences: communicating with migrant patients*. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Riddiford, N. (2007, April). Raising awareness in L2 learning – Does instruction using authentic discourse make a difference? Paper delivered to Social and Cognitive Aspects of Second Language Learning Conference, Auckland.
- Smith, E., & Comyn, P. (2003). *The development of employability skills in novice workers*. Adelaide: NCVER. Retrieved October 2, 2007, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- Stubbe, M., & Brown, P. (2002). *Talk that works: Communication in successful factory teams: A training resource kit*. Wellington: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91–109.
- Vine, B. (2004). *Getting things done at work: The discourse of power in workplace interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Virgona, C., Waterhouse, P., Sefton, R., & Sanguinetti, J. (2003). *Making experience work: Generic skills through the eyes of displaced workers. (Vols 1 & 2)*. Retrieved October 2, 2007, from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>
- Wigglesworth, G., & Yates, L. (forthcoming). Mitigating difficult request in the workplace: What learners and teachers need to know. *TESOL Quarterly*.
- Willing, K. (1992a). Problem-solving discourse in professional work. *Prospect*, 7(2), 57–64.
- Willing, K. (1992b). *Talking it Through: Clarification and Problem-Solving in Professional Work*, Sydney: NCELTR
- Willing, K. (1997). Modality in task-oriented discourse: The role of subjectivity in 'getting the job done'. *Prospect*, 12(2), 33–42.
- Wyatt-Smith, C., & Dooley, K. (1997). Shaping Australian policy on cultural

- understandings: Alternative approaches to inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1(3), 267–282.
- Yates, L. (2000). 'Ciao, guys!': Mitigation addressing positive and negative face concerns in the directives of native-speaker and Chinese background speakers of Australian English. Unpublished PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne.
- Yates, L. (2004). The 'secret rules of language': Tackling pragmatics in the classroom. *Prospect*, (19)1, 3–21.
- Yates, L., & Wigglesworth, G. (2005). Researching the effectiveness of professional development in pragmatics. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Researching applied linguistics in language teacher education* (pp. 261–280). New York: Springer.
- Yates, L. (2007, March). *Dinka speakers Downunder: Pitfalls for immigrants to Australia from Southern Sudan*. Paper presented at Pragmatics and Language Learning Conference, Hawai'i.

Chapter 3

Culture busting: understanding and teaching communication skills

Although employability skills have been a part of both communication and technically oriented courses for a long time, the general issue of training in such skills is still in its infancy in Australia. Despite the widespread agreement that they are crucial from entry level into an industry throughout a life time, the training system is still grappling with questions of delivery and assessment. In Australia, the VET sector has been plagued by conceptual and terminological confusion, and a recent review of work in employability skills concluded that these skills need to be made more explicit (NCVER 2003). *The training package development handbook* (DEST 2005) was designed to address this issue (see Chapter 2 of this volume).

Skills are generally viewed as being most successfully approached in an integrated way through active engagement in learning, in a relevant context and with the opportunity for reflection. There is an emphasis on approaches which encourage people to take responsibility for their own learning across their lifetimes and engage a variety of experiences and learning strategies (see, for example, Gibb and Curtin 2004).

A recent NCVER publication with the goal of fostering the development of employability skills in VET programs and workplaces (NCVER 2003) suggests the following activities:

- Workplace projects
- Community projects
- Mini-companies or practice firms
- Use of critical incidents to focus discussion and problem solving
- Investigation or inquiry based learning
- Problem solving learning
- Project learning
- Reflective learning and workplace practice.

These approaches are in line with current ideas on how to engage learners and develop the autonomy that will enable them to become lifelong learners. But we also need to ensure that we include explicit input and models of the skills that are to be tackled. This is particularly important for those whose prior learning has been done in another language and culture because we cannot assume that the 'secret rules' of communication can simply be learned through exposure or practice in a relevant context. As argued in the previous chapters, newly-arrived adults will have already learned ways of interacting in another culture and these may not be the same as those used or valued in communication in Australian workplaces. We therefore need to acknowledge the fundamentally culture-specific basis of what we mean when we refer to the facets of communication.

As argued in Chapter Two, however, the general descriptions given in the *Training package development handbook* do not provide this kind of detail and thus leave trainers to rely substantially on their own assumptions and ‘intuitions’. While native speakers and long-time members of a community might share these, they may not be consciously aware of them. This means that, in order to understand more explicitly what is happening and how it happens when we communicate, we need to be culture-busters. We need to bust open for ourselves and for others the ‘secret’ mechanics of how we achieve our purposes successfully in communication.

In order to help adult migrants to understand the generic communication skills they will need to gain and prosper at work we need to provide both explicit, culture-specific models and examples of how facets of communication are actually performed. We also need to find ways of incorporating these into learner-centred, reflective approaches to learning that will empower them to understand, use and investigate how communication works for themselves. In the next section, I look at how we can approach this.

Learning and teaching the micro-facets of communication

Since Canale and Swain’s much cited paper in 1980, we have been aware of the centrality of encouraging ‘communicative competence’ in language teaching, that is, of developing in learners the knowledge and skills that speakers use to make and interpret utterances in a way that is appropriate to the context they are in. An important part of this is ‘sociocultural competence’ (Hymes 1971; Canale 1983; Bachman and Palmer 1996), that is, the knowledge and skills of the particular social context and community where the communication takes place. Learners do not only need to know a language successfully, they also need to know how to use that language in the contexts in which they wish to operate.

However, our knowledge of, and therefore our teaching of, these aspects is still sadly lacking in many cases so that they frequently fail to get the attention they deserve in language programs and this neglect in the curriculum is reflected in a lack of appropriate teaching materials. A contributor to this neglect may also be the reluctance felt by many teachers to probe into such areas, since they are often related to deeply-held views and values closely connected to an individual’s world view and sense of identity. While we would be quite right to guard against the cultural imperialism inherent in insisting that learners communicate in the way that native speakers do, we are nevertheless failing in our duty to prepare learners to understand and successfully participate in interactions in the workplace and elsewhere if we are ignorant ourselves of how we achieve our aims in communication, and if we do not share what we know with learners. The choice of how far to make use of the communicative devices and values we present belongs ultimately to the learners, themselves, but this does not relieve us of our obligation to help them understand more about the ‘mechanics’ of how communication works in context.

Although appropriate word choice and grammatical construction are important in successful communication, as discussed in the previous chapter, my concern in this volume is the pragmatics of communication, that is how we make meaning in context. In particular, it is the features of interpersonal pragmatics, that is, how we signal our relationships and attitudes through the way we use language, that will be in particular the focus because they have not always had the attention they deserve, and have been frequently neglected in teaching materials.

A distinction is often made between ‘goal-oriented’ or ‘transactional’ communication and ‘interpersonal’ communication, that is, between when we use language to simply get a job done when we are concentrating more on how we relate to people. However, except in very extreme cases, we are usually doing both things at the same time – we are usually getting something done as well as communicating something about our relationship with our interlocutors.

Communication therefore almost always involves an interpersonal dimension. When we communicate with someone, even if we are being very goal-oriented, we inevitably also send signals about our relationship with him/her. We could do this by choosing to address someone as ‘mate’ instead of ‘sir’, or choosing to phrase a request as ‘could you please give’ instead of ‘give’, for example. In the first case, we may be signalling an equality of status (or at least a desire not to pull rank). In the second we may be signalling a wish to show a certain deference or desire not to impose. In both cases, we say something about ourselves and the way we view our interlocutor using different linguistic and non-linguistic devices. We are guided in these choices by the sociopragmatic values that we acquired as youngsters through interactions in our community (see Chapter 2). If we get our communication wrong, even in mundane, day-to-day interactions, we risk unintended effects on our relationships. This is why communication is so vital. While this is unfortunate at home, at work there is seldom the leisure or occasion on which mistakes can be rectified. It is therefore, important that we approach the learning and teaching of the facets of communication required in the certificates of the AQF with some cultural insight and understanding of how aspects of interpersonal pragmatics are learned, taught and used in everyday communication.

Studies exploring how interpersonal pragmatics are learned suggest that explicit teaching approaches are more successful than implicit ones – learners seem to make more progress when teachers unpack for them the mechanics of how and why language is used in the way that it is (see, for example, House 1996; Takahashi 2001; Yoshimi 2001). There is evidence that it may also be beneficial to include some explicit metapragmatic comment or explicit discussion of exactly how and why something is said or done in the way that it is in a context (see, for example, Rose and Kwai-fun 2001).

In her discussion of how to teach the cultural aspects of interaction, Hall (1999) stresses the importance of both input from ‘experts’, and the time and space for learners to reflect. The contribution of expert knowledge allows the learners insight into how something is done in a new environment and helps to guide and focus the reflection. Hall advocates the systematic study of the resources of a language as it is used in different situations which may be characterised by different settings, goals, participants, topics, participation structures, sequence of acts, openings, closings etc. She recommends giving learners guided practice in these in a way which allows for reflection and individual choice so that they can not only develop specific interactional skills, but also the skills to notice for themselves how, when and why devices are used in their interactions.

We cannot teach learners everything they will need to know. We therefore need to provide them with the tools to notice and investigate how language is used and how to build up their own repertoire of pragmatic devices for themselves outside the classroom. The framework Hall offers provides teachers and learners some general tools they can use to become their own researchers and investigate areas of interactive practice relevant to them. It is less explicit, however, as to the specifics of the

pedagogical tasks and activities than can be adopted to guide the noticing and the practice in the classroom (Hall 1999: 146–151).

Yates (2004) also advocates the use of authentic models together with some kind of explicit ‘expert’ comment. This can provide learners with the opportunity to ‘notice’ various linguistic and extra linguistic features. The noticing is then used as a basis for reflection and comparison with devices and values familiar to learners from the language and cultures they grew up in. Learners are encouraged to experiment with new or unfamiliar items and features in the comparative safety of the classroom, and then to try out some of these new skills outside the classroom.

Such an approach would have the following elements:

- 1 Explicit models based on authentic language
- 2 ‘Noticing’ activities to focus on linguistic and extralinguistic features
- 3 Explicit metapragmatic comment
- 4 Reflection, comparison and sensitive discussion of linguistic resources and communicative values in learners’ L1/C1 and in Australian English
- 5 Practice and experimentation in various contexts inside and outside the classroom
- 6 Exploration and debriefing of personal reactions and likely community reaction to the use of various features by learners
- 7 The development in learners of the ability to research interactive practices for themselves.

(adapted from Yates 2004: 15)

This approach suggests that learners undertake cycles of observation, analysis, reflection and tentative rehearsal and draws on both models from the target culture and the communication skills learners have developed in their early lives. This observation and analysis of authentic models, together with a personal reflection and comparison with what happens in other languages and cultures, creates a space in which devices and communicative values can be explored as cultural phenomena. This means they can be explored as culturally relative aspects of behaviour rather than behaviours that are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and discussion can then focus on what happens in a context and why; in a way that allows both learners and teachers to step outside their own cultural spaces and have some insight into another’s. How far learners experiment productively in their own lives with the unfamiliar behaviours and values they encounter, will be for them to decide. Non-native speakers are not native speakers, and it will not be expected that they behave in exactly the same way – they must find a ‘third’ space in which they feel comfortable (Kramsch 1993; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet 1999).

We cannot teach everything there is to learn about the interpersonal pragmatics of every situation learners are likely to encounter in the workplace. It therefore makes sense to concentrate first on situations and communicative functions that might be common in many different contexts, and also to develop and practise with learners the skills that they will need to become culture busters for themselves. Such an approach

will also help to avoid the danger of in some way objectifying or stereotyping culture and to maintain a view of language as dynamic. Such situations will be the focus of the materials in Section 2 of this volume.

Sharing the responsibility: the need to increase cross cultural and intercultural competence

However, before I discuss the projects and the materials that resulted in Section 2, I would first like to return to an issue raised in the Introduction and implicit in the above discussion. We live in a multicultural society in an increasingly globalised world. Although my focus here is on how native speakers communicate with each other and how we can assist migrants to understand the less visible features of interaction, communication is always a shared endeavour and therefore a shared responsibility. By focusing on the issues of migrants speaking in a language which is not their native language, I in no way wish to imply that it is only non-native speakers of a language who must shoulder the burden of successful interaction. In a multicultural environment, *both* parties have a responsibility to be aware of the particular communication issues that come into play.

The ‘secret rules’ of communication are largely secret to all of us, even – or perhaps especially – native speakers. Although native speakers may know how to abide by the secret rules and so can more easily hone their skills in communication appropriate to the workplace, they can rarely articulate exactly what these rules are, or what they do when they are abiding by them. They may therefore notice when something ‘goes wrong’ in an interaction, but they will not necessarily be able to say why, and are likely to attribute difficulties in interpersonal pragmatics to personality or, even more dangerously, to race. As native speakers generally outnumber migrants and are often in positions of power in a workplace this may result in undeserved criticism of an employee’s attitudes or abilities. Such misunderstandings are generally not pleasant or productive for anybody, and may seriously damage employment prospects for migrants in particular.

The *Employability Skills Framework* acknowledges that communication is a two way process, and so we need to share some of the responsibility for its success or failure and we *all* need to develop skills in understanding the role of cultural and linguistic practices in workplace communication. As we increasingly interact with colleagues from parts of the world we have scarcely even heard of, we will all eventually, in some way, face similar communications issues as migrants do. This means it will be important to develop in all of us the ability to communicate sensitively and successfully with people from another language and cultural background. We therefore need a more sensitive cross-cultural and intercultural approach to the skilling of the *whole* workforce, whatever their language and cultural background. The focus needs to be on developing ‘intercultural competence’, the ability to communicate successfully with people from other cultures, whoever they are (Byram 1997; Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco 1999).

Thus, by exploring what challenges exist for non-native speakers joining the workforce in Australia we also highlight the need for all of us to understand more about exactly how we communicate successfully, within as well as across cultures. In addition to illustrating some of the features of how English is used in workplace contexts, I hope the materials included in Section 2 of this volume will help all of us, not only our learners, to become more aware of the features that need to be taken into account in sensitive intercultural communication.

References

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to language pedagogy. In J. Richards & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2–27). London: Longman.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1–47.
- Crozet, C., Liddicoat, A., & Lo Bianco, J. (1999). Introduction: Intercultural competence: From language policy to language education. In J. Lo Bianco, A. Liddicoat & C. Crozet (Eds.), *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education* (pp. 1–20). Melbourne: Language Australia.
- DEST. (2005, October). *Training package development handbook*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/Training_Package_Development_Handbook.htm
- Gibb, J., & Curtin, P. (2004). Overview. In J. Gibb (Ed.), *Generic skills in vocational education and training. Research reading*. Adelaide: NCVER.
- Hall, J. K. (1999). A prosaics of interaction: The development of interaction competence in another language. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 137–151). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- House, J. (1996). Developing pragmatic fluency in English as a foreign language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 225–252.
- Hymes, D. (1971). *On communicative competence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lo Bianco, J., A. Liddicoat, & C. Crozet (Eds.). (1999). *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education*. Melbourne: Language Australia.
- Kramsch, C. (2003). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- NCVER (The National Centre for Vocational Education Research). (2003). *Fostering generic skills in VET programs and workplaces: At a glance*. Adelaide: NCVER. Retrieved November 7, 2006, from NCVER website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.
- Rose, K., & Kwai-fun, C. (2001). Inductive and deductive teaching of compliments and compliment responses. In K. Rose & G. Kasper, *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 145–170). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Takahashi, S. (2001). The role of input enhancement in developing pragmatic competence. In K. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 204–222). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yates, L. (2004). The 'secret rules of language': Tackling pragmatics in the classroom. *Prospect*, 19(1), 3–21.

Yoshimi, D. (2001). Explicit instruction and JFL learner's use of interactional discourse markers. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 223–244). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Section 2

Classroom perspectives

Chapter 4

The Communication skills project

Project goals

The *Communication skills project* was designed to illuminate more precisely how some of the communicative facets discussed in Section 1, in particular those relating to communication and teamwork, are enacted by native speakers of Australian English in the workplace in order to understand the language learning needs of intermediate level learners (CSWE III¹²) preparing to seek employment in a range of workplace roles. The focus was on identifying communicative facets in workplace interactions, and on how these could be incorporated into materials. An additional, professional development aim was to involve as many teachers as possible in the project. We hoped to not only gain insights from as many professionals as possible, but also to raise awareness among teachers of the issues surrounding generic employability skills and how they might be tackled by teachers in the classroom.

Project design

The project was conducted in three phases. As a researcher from the AMEP Research Centre I was the coordinator of the project.

In the first phase, the aim was to collect data on how a range of workplace communication tasks were performed by native speakers of Australian English. The features of interpersonal pragmatics used in these were analysed. Tasks and features were then selected for the development of materials in Phase 2 of the project. We wanted to use these dialogues to provide some pointers on how different facets of communication are routinely performed in Australian English in similar contexts. In Phase 2, materials exemplifying and illuminating the features uncovered in Phase 1 were developed. These were trialled and refined in the final phase of the project.

Project methodology

Phase 1: Identification of generic and language skills

This phase involved over 50 teachers and staff members from employment agencies engaged in finding employment for newly arrived immigrants to Australia.

A core group of five teacher researchers met with a researcher from the AMEP Research Centre to identify the learning outcomes at CSWE III level that reflected some of the employability skills in communication that learners would need as they prepared for employment. This group identified scenarios in a workplace setting that could be used to collect data on how native and expert speakers of English performed these skills.

In Phase 1, we wanted to:

- collect data on targeted activities, particularly specific speech acts that can be difficult for learners to perform (for example, complaints, requests and negotiations,

- collect samples of how native speakers would conduct the kinds of short scenarios that are used as tasks in the CSWE III in order to understand how the facets of communication employability skills are enacted in workplace interactions
- capture what people *thought* they would do in these situations rather than what they *actually* do. In the latter case, they are more likely to be influenced by factors related to the particular situation (for example, fatigue, hunger, dislike of their interlocutor, time of day)
- involve teachers who were not trained in ethnographic methods of data collection.

There is considerable debate on the best way to collect data in the field of interpersonal and cross cultural pragmatics, and each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Naturally occurring data collected from targeted contexts (for example, Clyne 1994; Yates 2000; Newton 2004, 2005), or from language corpora (for example, Koester 2002; Terkourafi 2005) provide excellent descriptions of what actually happens in a particular situation. However, as McCarthy and O'Keefe (2004) note, this also means that such data also reflect the specific factors relating to the exact situation in which they are collected. For example, the past history of the interlocutors and their previous interactions will play an important role, as will how tired they are feeling, and so on. The particular factors in a situation will combine to reflect that particular situation. Drew and Curl (2007), for example, illustrate the ways in which speakers vary the way they make the same requests if they want to project urgency to a particular interlocutor for particular reasons. Grossi (2007) similarly illustrated how compliment responses from the same speaker varied over time in the same context as she received more and more of the same compliment.

Although data that are elicited in some way using a role play of questionnaire do not capture exactly what has been said by someone in an authentic situation, they do reflect a more generalised sense of what is appropriate in a situation. They therefore offer models that are less affected by the individual histories of the speakers and the particular nature of a specific encounter, and are therefore useful for instruction. Golato (2003) reinforces this point in her comparison of different data collection procedures. She argues that, while CA (Conversation Analytic) analyses of naturally occurring discourse illuminate the organisation of talk, analyses of elicited data allow a kind of distillation of what the speaker knows about of how to act in a situation.

Role plays offer data that are more naturalistic than those collected using written questionnaires. Because they are spoken, they allow for some of the online features that are found in naturally occurring speech, and they also enable researchers to target more precisely the kind of data required. They are also able to provide enough examples of the target act, or function, to make generalisation meaningful. For these reasons, role-play data rather than naturally occurring data were collected in this project.

The teachers in the group recorded colleagues, friends and neighbours participating in dialogue role plays in which they took the part of the other speaker. The role plays related to different kinds of complex requests and negotiations (CSWE III, Module E, Intermediate Negotiation Skills). They were transcribed and analysed for the features of interpersonal pragmatics relevant to communication and teamwork employability skills.

Although the data were not naturally occurring, they were unscripted and so contained many of the features normally found in everyday interactions. Those interpersonal pragmatics assessed as most relevant to learners from another language background were identified. We then selected the specific scenarios to be used in the teaching materials on employability communication and teamwork skills that we wanted to develop in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Developing activities to target specific communication and teamwork skills

In this phase, two teachers worked with me and six other teachers to develop a combination of audio and print materials which highlighted and practised the communication facets and features of interpersonal pragmatics identified in Phase 1 and relevant to both certificates offered under the AQF and CSWE III Module E.

A number of semi-scripted role-play dialogues based on the scenarios selected in Phase 1 were acted out by other teachers and professionally recorded. The scenarios chosen included interactions between people of unequal status (such as boss and employee), as well as colleagues of equal status and allowed for the analysis of how the participants communicated in both roles. We decided not to use actors in order to maximise naturalness, as actors frequently do not use or deliver language in a natural way and we wanted our dialogues to be as 'authentic' as possible. Every effort was made to ensure that the role plays were as natural and spontaneous as possible.

Based on our experiences in the previous phase, we decided to use semi-scripted rather than completely unscripted scenarios. This meant we were able to maintain some control over the content of the dialogues, but at the same time we could make sure the features we were interested in were included. For example, in a previously recorded scenario in which a supervisor asked an employee to swap a roster, we found three steps in the opening phase (greeting, statement of problem, request). We therefore wanted to ensure they also occurred in the dialogue recorded for the materials, and so included this information in the guide given to participants in the role plays.

Four of these role plays were selected as the basis for materials development:

- *An employee negotiates leave:* the negotiation of a request from an employee to a boss so that the interlocutors were of unequal status (see Chapter 5)
- *A boss negotiates a change in roster:* the negotiation of a request from a boss to an employee so that interlocutors were of unequal status (see Chapter 6)
- *A boss complains:* a complaint from a boss to an employee so that interlocutors were of unequal status (see Chapter 7)
- *Colleagues negotiate a time to meet:* the negotiation of a mutually acceptable meeting time between two colleagues so that interlocutors were of equal status (see Chapter 8).

The research team edited the recordings to a length appropriate for classroom use. This was necessary because it proved difficult to control the time of semi-scripted dialogues as their semi-spontaneous nature sometimes resulted in a lengthy exchange which would have been too long for classroom use. Every care was taken to ensure that the editing was done in a way which preserved the overall structure and naturalness of the exchanges.

The dialogues were then transcribed and analysed for those features of interpersonal pragmatics identified in Phase 1 as important for developing an awareness of the facets of communication skills likely to vary across language and cultures. These were seen as the most difficult areas for learners to understand without some sort of explicit attention.

Each of the four dialogues was then used as the centrepiece for activities developed by two of the teachers. The activities were designed to highlight and practise the features identified in Phase 1 of the project. Learners are guided towards an understanding of the context and scaffolded to ‘notice’ aspects of interpersonal pragmatics. They reflect on similarities and differences from the way they would have used them in their own languages and cultures and then practise them in a supported way.

We hoped that learners would gain insight into and experience of, how Australians conduct such communicative events. We also wanted them to develop the understandings and tools that would enable them to identify and understand such features in other interactions for themselves. The materials therefore illustrate what we have found out about the language used in these scenarios, and also provide extended examples of how we can use a similar methodology to develop learning and teaching materials.

Phase 3: Trialling and refining materials

The materials developed in Phase 2 were trialled and refined in Phase 3 of the project. The research team ran several professional development workshops around Australia (and one in New Zealand) and invited comment and feedback from teachers. The recorded dialogues and draft materials were also trialled in classrooms by 19 AMEP teachers in different contexts working with intermediate level students. The teachers fed back their reflections on the materials, and in some cases they also fed back students’ reflections. In the light of this feedback, the materials were further refined.

The materials were generally very well received by both teachers and students. Comments from both groups suggest that they addressed a real materials gap and, in some cases, impacted on the way in which students used language, even after just a short trial. Both appreciated the opportunity to tackle interpersonal pragmatics in an explicit, yet reflective manner.

Teachers appreciated the ‘authentic’ feel of the dialogues, the focus on aspects of language and language use that often get missed out, and the relevance of workplace contexts:

‘ ... found it excellent ... My CSWE students found the taped conversation very “real” sounding and the discussion and identification of fillers and softeners very interesting and challenging.’

Teachers found the materials useful as a springboard to class discussion and exploration outside. This encouraged learners to reflect on what they heard around them, challenging them to consider the cultural bases of communication:

‘Overall – terrific natural speech, challenging for students – highlights cultural stuff – leads to good discussions in class.’

‘Students found it useful to know that we need to use softening rather than going straight to the point. They also gave real life experiences especially those who are working P/T [part-time]. Collected own and bring to class for discussion.’

‘Found students more interested in talking about what they’d noticed in Australia, for example, our constant use of please and thank you.’

The students who were asked to comment did indeed report that the materials gave them greater insight into the way things are done at work in Australia, and how this might be different from what they had experienced before:

‘I think negotiation is useful for me to learn how to understand the workplace situation in Australia. They are not going straight always indirect way.’

‘It is very useful to know how to ask/demand/order someone politely and also effectively by using soften words. I also learned that soften phrases doesn’t sound like threat or warning but they actually works effectively. So I need to notice the tone well.’

The final materials (presented in Chapters 5 to 8 of this volume) are designed to be used with CSWE III (intermediate) level students who are anticipating joining the workforce. They specifically address learning outcomes at this level of listening and speaking. Pragmalinguistic features relevant to the following facets of communication skills are covered:

- Listening and understanding
- Negotiating responsively
- Persuading effectively
- Empathising
- Being assertive.

These facets are tackled to a different extent in each scenario, and are often combined. For example, ‘negotiating responsively’ involves ‘listening and understanding’ and ‘persuading effectively’. It can also sometimes involve ‘being assertive’, as illustrated in the dialogue and activities presented in Chapter 5 (An employee negotiates leave). The facet ‘sharing information’, which was not specifically targeted, can also play an important part in negotiating responsively, and so on.

The pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features highlighted vary from dialogue to dialogue, although there are some recurrent themes. For example, the use of softening devices for impositive acts (such as requests, complaints or rejections) was evident in all the dialogues. This, therefore, runs as a theme though all four sample work units. The use of other devices (such as the way in which speakers use ‘fillers’ to signal information and prepare for what is to come) is highlighted in only two of the units (An employee negotiates leave; Colleagues negotiate a time to meet). Our overall aim, however, was to develop in students (and teachers) an awareness of how these kinds of features are used and how we can help learners understand them.

An important aim is to provide learners (and teachers) with the tools for listening and personal ‘research’ into the language they encounter outside the classroom. Chapters 5 to 7 revolve around dialogues between people of unequal status at work, in each case a boss and an employee. The dialogue in Chapter 8 is between colleagues of equal status. Chapter 6 involved two males, while the others involve a male and a female. The participants all spoke in a way that was comfortable for them. No particular gendered features were targeted, although it is hoped that the reflective activities in the materials will invite learners to listen and take note of gender differences (and similarities) they hear around them.

The activities in each chapter vary slightly according to the kind of features that are highlighted. Each begins, however, with exercises which encourage reflection on the setting, the participants and their relationship, what the dialogue is about, and other contextual features that impact on how the interaction is conducted. This is followed by a number of exercises designed to help the learners focus on interpersonal pragmatics and their likely impact on the interlocutor.

Opportunities for personal reflection, comparison with what happens in other languages and cultures, and class discussion are also provided. Cultural notes at salient points throughout the materials highlight cultural values and issues, and workplace information relevant to the dialogue content. There is usually some guided practice in the language features highlighted, followed by freer role-play practice using a similar situation. In Chapter 9, I consider the implications of the projects reported here for workplace training in employability skills.

Notes

- 12 Certificates of Spoken and Written English, the national curriculum used in the AMEP. Level III is the highest level taught in the program.

References

- Clyne, M. G. (1994). *Inter-cultural communication at work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Drew, P., and Curl, T. (2007, July). *A comparative study of requesting professional services, emergency services*. Paper presented at International Pragmatics Association Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Golato, A. (2003). Studying compliment responses: A comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally-occurring talk. *Applied Linguistics*, 23, 90–121.
- Grossi, V. (2007, October). *Teaching pragmatic competence: Compliments in English*. Paper presented at AMEP National Conference, Mooloolaba, Queensland.

- Koester, A. J. (2002). The performance of speech acts in workplace conversations and the teaching of communicative functions. *System*, 30, 167–184.
- Newton, J. (2004). Face-threatening talk on the factory floor: Using authentic workplace interactions in language teaching. *Prospect*, 19(1), 47–64.
- McCarthy, M., and O’Keeffe, A. (2004). Research in the teaching of speaking. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24, 26–43.
- Terkourafi, M. (2005). Beyond the micro-level in politeness research. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture*, 1(2), 237–262.
- Yates, L. (2000). ‘Ciao, guys!’: Mitigation addressing positive and negative face concerns in the directives of native-speaker and Chinese background speakers of Australian English. Unpublished PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne.
- Yates, L., & Wigglesworth, G. (2005). Researching the effectiveness of professional development in pragmatics. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Researching applied linguistics in language teacher education* (pp. 261–280). New York: Springer.

Chapter 5

An employee negotiates leave

Making a request to the boss is a communicative situation that many new arrivals find demanding. Requests in general are often tricky in any culture because they can be face-threatening. This means that adopting exactly the right tone and stance can be crucial to both short-term success and to the impression that each party gains of the other.

Across cultures these difficulties are magnified. This can be because of potential differences in expectations relating to the tenor of the relationship (for example, appropriate levels of informality). It can also be because the rights of each party may differ (for example, how much right the employee has to make such a request, and what the obligations of an employer might be to comply). There may also not be shared understandings of the appropriate moves and devices that can be used in this context (such as how to prepare and soften the request). For example, learners who have never worked in systems where paid leave is a right, may not have had any experience of making this kind of request and be unsure how far they can assert their rights. Those from societies in which it is customary to overtly signal hierarchical relationships, may not be aware of how much formality is common in an Australian context where more apparently egalitarian modes of address are often preferred.

Learning level

The materials in this chapter can be used to practise CSWE III, Module A, LO 2, LO 3; Module E, LO 1 and LO 2, and Module F, LO 1 and also develop skills that would be useful in Module C, LO 1 and LO 2. They would fit into other curriculum frameworks that focus on spoken skills (requesting, negotiation and persuasion).

Communicative Facets

The materials in this chapter address the communicative facets of:

- Listening and understanding
- Negotiating responsively
- Empathising
- Persuading effectively
- Being assertive.

Exercises

Exercises 1 and 2 lead the learners towards a general understanding of the context, purpose and participants in the dialogue. This allows learners to establish some of the sociopragmatic factors that underlie the word choices made by the participants.

Exercise 3 focuses on the sociocultural values underlying requests for leave in Australia. It guides learners towards some of the specific language used in formulating the request. Learners are encouraged to reflect on expectations around leave and working conditions in Australia and in other countries where they have lived. Links to websites about working conditions in Australia are also given.

Exercise 4 explicitly addresses the overall structure of the speech ‘event’, allowing learners the opportunity to identify and reflect on the stages that might be involved in a complex negotiation.

Exercises 5 and 6 guide learners towards an appreciation of the potential difficulties for the boss. They draw the learners’ attention to the specific ways in which the employee softens the impact of this request while at the same time maintaining his position without aggression. An explicit focus on softeners, and a more general discussion of how such requests might be approached in different cultures, allows exploration of both the sociocultural issues (for example, would the ‘need’ to go on holiday with your partner be perceived as a persuasive reason for the request in other cultures?) and the linguistic issues (for example, the devices we use to soften the impact of a request). The communicative facets of ‘being assertive’, ‘listening and understanding’ and ‘being persuasive’ are therefore involved within an examination of ‘negotiating responsively’.

Exercise 7 continues this focus on the mechanics of how the speakers soften the impact of what they have to say. A cultural note highlights the role of softeners in perceptions of politeness and appropriateness, whatever the speaker’s role or status.

Exercises 8 and 9 focus on fillers, the little words such as ‘look’, ‘um’ and ‘yeah’. Such fillers generally get very little attention in language programs but can have an enormous impact on the impression we form of interlocutors. They play an important role in signalling that we are listening and understanding what is said by an interlocutor. A cultural note focuses on the role of fillers.

Exercises 10 and 11 give learners an opportunity to practice the features of negotiating they have encountered. They do this first in a scaffolded way through a short controlled exercise, and then in a freer way through role play.

An employee negotiates leave

Language skills and values related to communication skill facets: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively and being assertive

Sample materials

Who are these people?

Where are they?

Vocabulary:

annual leave

to owe

incredibly

to run something by someone



Exercise 1

Listen to Terry and his supervisor talking.
Answer the questions.

1. What's the conversation about?

2. What's the problem?

3. What's the outcome?

Exercise 2

Listen again and answer the questions.

1. Why is Terry's request for leave a problem for the supervisor?

2. Why does Terry want leave at short notice?

Exercise 1 and 2 give practice in listening generally and more closely to the text and in making explicit the social and contextual judgments we make as we listen to and interact with people. Facet practised: listening and understanding.

Exercise 3

Listen again for Terry's request.

Terry: OK. Oh good, um I was um _____ to _____

Supervisor: _____, uh soon.

E: And uh, like in a coupla weeks time

S: Um...

E: And I _____ to run that by you, see if that's _____

Discuss:

In your culture, who do you ask about taking leave?

When do you ask for leave?

In your country how much leave do people generally get?

Would you ask in this way? What would be similar/ different?

Cultural note

In Australia, if you are a full time or part time employee, not casual, you are entitled to 4 weeks annual paid leave (pro-rata). Casual employees are not entitled to either paid annual or sick leave.

Visit: www.wagenet.gov.au. This is the Australian Federal Government website with information about working rights and conditions.

www.job-watch.org.au. This website is run by the Employment Legal Rights Centre in Victoria.

By drawing out what learners' experiences are and what they know about leave requests, Exercise 3 helps them to clarify their expectations, relate them to what happens in Australia, and recognise some of the sociocultural values underlying requests for leave. These understandings underpin the communicative facets of being assertive, persuading effectively and negotiating responsively.

There are three stages in this negotiation:

1. Greeting and preparation
2. Negotiation
3. Confirmation and checking.

Exercise 4

Listen and read.

What issues come up in negotiating the leave request?

Discuss where the 3 stages of this negotiation are

Terry: Oh Kathy hi, I'm glad I saw you, I just wanted to um ask you a question if I could about leave, is that a possibility now or?...or ah

Kathy: To speak now or to ask...?

T: Yeah, you got a couple of minutes?

K: Oh sure yeah, yeah

T: OK oh good, um I was um hoping to take some annual leave, uh soon...

K: Oh

T: And uh, like in a coupla weeks time

K: Um...

T: And I just wanted to run that by you, see if that's a possibility

K: Well you do know this is our busiest period

T: Yeah yeah I know that, yeah

K: Um...

T: The thing is uh, my partner's uh arranged leave, which is incredibly difficult to do, um and we decided that we'd try and work it out together this year cause we haven't done it for awhile, to get away together, so that's in two weeks time

K: Oh so...

T: Yeah

K: Your partner's already organised...

T: Yeah, yeah

K: Oh. You should have really asked me earlier than...

T: Ah. Yeah well it's just, it's sort of come up this way so couldn't really do that, mm

K: Um so there's no chance of delaying the leave?

T: No... this this, like, this sort of job uh situation is the leave comes up at a certain time and we haven't had leave together for a long time so we're gonna try and work it out this time, so just hoping that I'd be able to get a couple of weeks off um in two weeks time. I know it's sort of, it's a busy time, but uh...

K: Yeah, look I – well we do owe you leave so...

T: Yeah, yeah

K: Look I'll have to, I'll have to check and I'll see if it's possible...

T: Alright

K: ...to spare some time

T: Yeah. Is – can that be done pretty quickly because I sorta have to confirm um that I'm OK for the bookings and things that we've gotta arrange

Exercise 4 continued on page 48

Exercise 4 continued from page 47

- K: Oh OK so...
T: Yeah
K: Alright Terry, look um... yeah, should be OK um... you know as I said you know we do owe you uh leave um...
T: So you got any idea when that might be, that you could let me know for sure? How long will that take to sort of check out?
K: Well look seeing that you know your partner's already organised um the leave I think it should be OK, we'll just get somebody to cover you
T: Right yeah, I'm sorry there wasn't any, you know a lot of warning so I couldn't really sorta ask you before
K: Yeah I understand, yep
T: Um it's just worked out that way
K: Yep OK
T: Alright, so when might that be, that you could tell me?
K: Um... look I'll try to arrange um somebody to cover you um I'll I'll try and let you know as soon as I can. But it's, it should be OK
T: Right, OK so I'll work on it being OK
K: Yes
T: Alright, OK. Thanks a lot Kathy. Seeya
K: Alright then, bye

Exercise 5

The supervisor mentions some difficulties.

Write them below

Discuss

Does Terry change his request?

How does he get what he wants?

What kinds of words and phrases does he use to soften his requests?

What kinds of words and phrases does he use to persuade his boss?

In your culture, would you negotiate your request in the same way? What would be the same/different? Would you use the same arguments and would they work?

Softeners

Look at Terry's greeting:

Oh Kathy hi, I'm glad I saw you, I just wanted to um ask you a question if I could about leave, is that a possibility now or?...or ah

Exercise 5 continued on page 49

Exercise 5 continued from page 48

And compare it with this:

Kathy, I want to ask you about leave now.

Exercise 6

Discuss:

What is the difference between the two requests?

Which request is more polite in English? Why?

Which sentence is more polite in your culture? Why?

To be polite:

- Terry greets Kathy.
- He uses **just** to make the request seem smaller.
- He uses **if I could** and **Is that a possibility?** to signal that his request may be demanding.
- Terry also uses *simple past* or *past continuous* to soften his requests.

For example:

I wanted ...

I was hoping ...

These are softeners which soften the impact of the request.

Here are some more examples used in the dialogue:

sort of	really	would be able to	you know
---------	--------	------------------	----------

Discuss with your teacher why they are used and what they mean? Do you use them in the same way in your culture and language? Would you use them differently if you were talking to your colleague rather than your boss?

Exercise 7

‘Highlight the softeners that Terry uses in the dialogue’.

How many did you find?

Compare them with the ones your neighbour marked.

Compare these with ones your teacher has marked.

What are they used for?

Do you use the same ones in your language? Explain how and why you use them.

Exercise 7 continued on page 50

Exercise 7 continued from page 49

Cultural note

Softening requests in Australian English, helps to make negotiations more polite. As in this dialogue, people use them to be assertive without appearing to be too direct or lacking in sympathy. Softeners can be useful when you want to persuade someone to do something that may not be easy for them.

People in power may use softeners even though they don't really need to, but it can mean the difference between being seen as a reasonable boss or an unreasonable one.

Fillers

Look at the Supervisor's sentence below:

Alright Terry, **look um...yeah**, should be **OK um...you know** as I said you know we do owe you **uh** leave **um...**

You'll notice some fillers have been marked...

For example:

look	um	yeah	OK	uh
------	----	------	----	----

Exercise 8

Discuss:

What do you think these fillers mean?

Why do the speakers use them?

Do you use fillers in your language? Why / why not? Are they the same as the ones we use in English? Do you use them for the same reasons?

How much do English speakers use them? How much do you use them in your language?

In this sentence, the fillers signal the following meanings:

look	Signals change in thinking / pay attention to me
um...	Gives time to think
yeah,	Agrees to Terry's request to know 'pretty quickly'
should be OK um...	Gives more time to think
you know as I said you know we do owe you uh leave	Shows that this is difficult to say
um...	Gives more time to think

Exercise 8 continued on page 51

Exercise 8 continued from page 50

Cultural note

Fillers such as these are often used in Australian English. They give the listener time to understand, to think, to recover from surprise before progressing to important information or a request. They can sometimes show that you are listening and understanding what is being said, although too many can also sound odd.

Exercise 9

Look at the text again and highlight the fillers. Try to say why they are used. Discuss them with your teacher.

Oh often signals that the information received isn't quite what was expected.

Yeah can be used to acknowledge someone's position, even if you don't agree with them.

Um can introduce something that is difficult to say or difficult for the interlocutor to receive, such as disagreement or criticism.

Exercises 5 to 8 focus on some of the strategies that we use to persuade and negotiate in ways that are assertive but not aggressive. Terry empathises with the boss's position, but does not waiver from his goal. He uses a wide range of devices which soften the impact of his request, including fillers, and these are useful in the facets, negotiating responsively, empathising, persuading effectively and being assertive.

Exercise 10

Use some of the fillers you have discussed to make this difficult request more polite and easier to accept.

You are an employee. You ask your supervisor...

...I want to go home early to pick up my children.

...I want to start work late tomorrow.

Exercise 11

Practise this task with your partner. Try to use some fillers and softeners that we have been discussing.

When you are ready, record the task together and then play it back and listen to see if you have used fillers and softeners appropriately.

Task Card: Asking to leave work early/start late

Exercise 11 continued on page 52

Exercise 11 continued from page 51

Employee:

You want to leave early to pick up your children even though you know it's a busy time.

Or

You want to start work late tomorrow morning because you have a specialist's appointment.

Supervisor:

This is a really busy time at work. You don't replace anyone at short notice. It may be possible to arrange a shift change with someone, but you'd prefer they did their business out of work hours.

Exercise 10 gives learners controlled practice in using fillers with a softening function, while Exercise 11 provides freer practice in using all of the features highlighted in the unit. This provides practice in the following facets: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively, empathising, persuading effectively and being assertive.

Answers:

Exercise 1

1. Terry asks his supervisor for annual leave
2. It is short notice
3. The supervisor will organise someone to replace Terry

Exercise 2

1. It is a busy time at work
2. His partner has already arranged leave

Exercise 4

The issues that come up are:

It's the busiest period

He should have asked earlier

Someone must cover for him

Chapter 6

A boss negotiates a change in roster

In this chapter the focus is a complex negotiation between a boss who needs to change the work roster and an employee who would have to change the time that he normally works. While Chapter 5 highlights a request from an employee to a superior, in this case the request is the other way around – from a supervisor to an employee. This allows a focus on the way in which the boss approaches the request and how they negotiate a solution.

Migrants are often mystified by what appears to them to be the indirect way in which managers relate to employees. This is partly a cultural matter to do with communication-related values. In Australia there is a general preference not to mark hierarchy directly so that people in positions of power may talk to an employee in a manner which is very similar to the way they would talk to a colleague or a boss. This is underpinned by expectations and legislation regarding an employee's rights in the workplace in Australia. Both of these aspects may be unfamiliar to adults with experience of working in very different cultural or industrial environments.

The dialogue in this chapter, therefore, represents a model of a boss who is assertive in that his message is clear, but who also listens attentively to what the employee has to say and empathises with the difficulties he has in complying with the request. He is also able to negotiate and accept some delay in the resolution of this problem rather than demanding an immediate solution. Workplaces differ, and not all bosses will be so patient, but the dialogue models the language and provides a springboard for reflection and discussion on responses which may be less familiar to learners.

Learner level

The materials in this chapter can be used to practise CSWE III, Module A, LO 2, LO 3; Module E, LO 1 and LO 2, and Module F, LO 1 and also develops skills that would be useful in Module C, LO 1 and LO 2. They would fit into other curriculum frameworks that focus on spoken skills (requesting and negotiation).

Communicative facets

The materials in this chapter address the communicative facets of:

- Listening and understanding
- Empathising
- Negotiating responsively.

The dialogue also illustrates some aspects of communication which help to smooth communication between members of a team.

Exercises

Exercises 1 and 2 lead the learners towards a general understanding of the context, purpose and participants in the dialogue. This allows them to establish some of the sociopragmatic factors that underpin the choices made by the participants.

Exercises 3 and 4 focus on the way in which the boss uses a compliment to prepare the way for the request that he anticipates will not be popular, and on the way in which he formulates the request itself indirectly, in a number of phrases, to soften its impact. Learners are encouraged to reflect on how far requests of this kind would be approached in a similar way in cultures in which they have had experience. They then consider the stance taken by both parties in the negotiation as well as the way it is played out. This allows a focus on the underlying sociocultural values and the mechanics of the communicative facets of persuasion and negotiation. Cultural notes focus on how to prepare for a request and strategies to make requests appear less direct.

Exercises 5 to 8 allow a focus on the overall structure of the negotiating event and its role in workplace communications. The dialogue provides an illustration of the function of compromises in negotiating, and how they might be made in English. The exercises highlight the role of compromises and promote reflection on the ways in which they might be used when empathising and persuading in Australia and other cultures. This is useful because rights and obligations about how far such compromises may be made or offered, and even whether a compromise is itself viewed positively, may vary across cultures. Cultural notes highlight the role of offering compromises in negotiations.

Exercises 9 and 10 focus on some of the informal language used in the dialogue to perform different tasks, with an added cultural note on the pervasiveness of informal language in Australian workplaces.

Exercise 11 offers the opportunity for learners to practise in similar situations the communication skills involved in negotiating and being persuasive that they have encountered in the chapter.

A boss negotiates a change in roster

Language skills and values related to communication skill facets: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively and being assertive

Sample materials

Who are these people?

Where are they?

What are they doing?

Vocabulary

a roster

roster on / roster off

shifts

clock on / clock off



Exercise 1

Listen to Terry and his supervisor talking. Answer the questions below.

1. What's the problem? _____
2. What's the outcome? _____

Exercise 2

Listen again and answer the following questions

1. Why does the supervisor want Terry to change to evening shift?

2. What does Terry agree to?

3. Does the supervisor accept this?

Exercise 1 and 2 give practice in listening generally and more closely to the text and in making explicit the social and contextual judgments we make as we listen to and interact with people. Facet practised: listening and understanding

Exercise 3

The supervisor doesn't make a direct request. He prepares the employee (Terry) for something he may not want to hear.

Exercise 3 continued from page 55

Listen and note down below some of these preparations.

Listen again. Discuss what you think the request is.

Cultural Note

Preparing for a request. The supervisor greets, mentions a problem and makes an indirect request. (I really need someone in that evening shift... I'm really hoping you'd be able to cover that.)

In your culture:

Do people usually prepare for unpleasant requests in this way?

Discuss how you would do it in your culture. Would this be different if you were talking to a boss rather than an employee? How?

Exercise 3 highlights how speakers, even those in authority, can soften the impact of their requests by preparing for them carefully and avoiding a direct request. In this case the boss states a need and follows this with a statement of hope. The facets practised: listening and understanding and negotiating responsively.

Exercise 4

Listen to the supervisor make the request. Fill in the missing words in the request.

Umm, unfortunately (it) just came up without warning. I really _____
_____ in that evening shift...

...obviously who _____ um a bit more _____...

...and I think you'd be _____ to do that so,

I'm really _____ to cover that.

Cultural note:

Making the request. The supervisor breaks up the request into several parts because it's unpleasant information. There is no direct request. He prepares Terry by first explaining the problems and then giving a compliment.

This makes it much harder for Terry to say no.

Look at the request again. Write down and discuss the problems and the compliment the supervisor uses to prepare his request.

Exercise 4 continued on page 57

Exercise 4 continued from page 56

Problems _____

Compliment _____

Discuss:

Would a supervisor make a request in this way in a similar situation in your culture?

Exercise 5

Listen again. Identify some difficulties that Terry mentions.

Cultural note

In many workplaces in Australia it is expected that employees and supervisors will negotiate in situations like requesting leave, rosters, shifts etc. Both parties may need to compromise.

Exercises 4 and 5 give practice in listening and understanding a complex speech event and identifying the strategies used: a specific focus on the language in their repertoire, while reflection helps learners to build their understanding of how this might be done differently in other cultures they are familiar with. Facets practised: empathising, listening and understanding and negotiating responsively.

There are three stages in this negotiation:

1. Greeting and preparation
2. Negotiating
3. Confirming and checking.

Exercise 6

Listen and read. Discuss where the 3 stages of this negotiation are.

Supervisor: Oh hi Terry could I have a quick word with you?

Employee: Ah yeah sure

S: Great, thank you. Uh something's come up for Jenny

E: Yeah

S: Um she needs to take some time off

E: Right OK

S: And so she won't be able to work her evening roster for the next couple of weeks

Exercise 6 continued on page 58

Exercise 6 continued from page 57

- E: Ah right, yeah
- S: Um unfortunately just came up without much warning. I really need someone in that evening shift obviously who has um a bit more experience
- E: Right, yeah
- S: Uh because a lot of these staff there are pretty new and I think you'd be the best person to do that so I'm really hoping you'd be able to cover that
- E: Yeah it's gonna be a bit difficult because see I got a couple of family commitments in the next couple of weeks which are going to interfere with uh the late shift
- S: Yeah well I understand that it's yeah, it's very short notice of course and there are things gonna be on, I'm just hoping that um you'd be able to uh... well step into probably a lot of that time... how – how much of a problem is it for you?
- E: Well yeah I could do some of it, I could do some of it
- S: Yeah
- E: There's a coupla times that I probably need to be... uh evenings off so if we can arrange most of the time perhaps and, and make sure that I have a coupla evenings off in those two weeks
- S: OK that'd be fine, look you just let me know which – d'you know now?
- E: Oh well I've gotta talk to people at home so I'll have to let you know tomorrow
- S: OK well if you can come back to me tomorrow which days you can't do
- E: Yeah fine
- S: But otherwise are you happy to stop – like I really apologise for the...
- E: Yeah nah that's OK yeah
- S: ...the sudden nature of this but it'd be terrific if you could. I really appreciate it
- E: Alright, yeah sure. OK, I'll speak to you tomorrow
- S: Thanks Terry

Exercise 7

Discuss

The supervisor and employee both make compromises.

What is a compromise?

Are they useful in negotiations? Explain why/why not.

Would you use them in the same way in your own language/culture?

Why/why not?

Exercise 8

Note down the compromise made by each person.

Exercise 8 continued on page 59

Exercise 8 continued from page 58

Supervisor	Employee

Cultural note

In Australia it is expected that people will make some compromises in negotiation, for example holidays, shift work, roster change.

Exercises 6 to 8 help learners to focus on how a complex negotiation of this type is staged and the role of offering compromise in negotiations. Underpinning this is the understanding that the 'secret rules' of negotiation may be different across cultures, and not all cultures view compromise as positively. The facets practised are: negotiating responsively and empathising.

Exercise 9

Confirming and checking

Listen to the tape again. Fill in the missing words.

- S: OK that'd be fine, look you just _____ which – d'you know now?
E: Oh well I've _____ to people at home so I'll have to let you know tomorrow
S: OK well if you can _____ me tomorrow which days you can't do
E: Yeah fine
S: But _____ are you happy to stop—like I really apologise for the...
E: Yeah nah that's OK yeah
S: ...the _____ of this but it'd be terrific _____ I really appreciate it
E: Alright, yeah sure. OK I'll speak to you tomorrow

Underline the words that are informal. What do they mean?

Discuss with your teacher and class

The language used in this negotiation is informal: for example, Terry and his supervisor use first names and idioms.

Why do the speakers speak in this way?

How formal would you be in a similar situation in your culture? Why?

Exercise 9 continued on page 60

Exercise 9 continued from page 59

Cultural note

The use of informal spoken language in the workplace is quite common in Australia and first names are used even between employees and their boss in many places. However, the relationships between them in the work situation are still formal!

Exercise 10

The following idioms were used. Find them and underline them in the dialogue. What do they mean?

something's come up to take/have time off to come/get back to (me)
to cover for (someone) it'd be terrific

Use the idioms appropriately to complete the sentences below. The meaning of each one is illustrated in a sample sentence.

1. Jenny can't work the evening shift because something has **happened unexpectedly** at home.

I can't get to the meeting this morning because something has _____
_____ at home.

2. The supervisor wants Terry to **work Jenny's shift for** her.

The supervisor wants Terry to _____ Jenny.

3. Terry told his supervisor that he would **talk to him later** about the times he will not be available.

Terry told his supervisor that he would _____ him about the times he will not be available.

Exercises 9 and 10 deal with the confirming and checking stage of the dialogue. This stage is found in many different goal-oriented dialogues involving negotiation and it is useful for learners to identify the language used. There is a focus on the overall informal nature of the language used and some specific practice in using potentially new idiomatic language. The facets practised: listening and understanding and negotiating responsively.

Exercise 11

Here are 2 role-plays to practise.

Task Card A: Asking for shorter working hours

Employee: You want to work shorter hours of work as you are studying part-time.

Exercise 11 continued on page 61

Exercise 11 continued from page 60

Supervisor: An employee wants to reduce their workload by one day a week. This person is an efficient worker, but you need someone to work in this position 5 days a week.

Task Card B: Changing a work roster

Employee: You want to change your work roster. You've been on this roster for 3 years and would like a change. You don't have a family, but feel your social life is severely restricted by this roster.

Supervisor: Your employee wants to change rosters. This roster time is unpopular with other staff who have families. But you realise that this employee has worked this shift for a long time.

Exercise 11 provides free practice in the facets and skills covered in this unit. The facets practised are: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively and empathising.

Answers

Exercise 1

1. Supervisor wants Terry to work evenings
2. Partial agreement

Exercise 2

1. Jenny needs to take time off
2. He agrees to do most of the shift, but with a couple of evenings off
3. Yes

Exercise 3

Something has come up for Jenny

She needs to take time off
She won't be able to work
Just came up
Need someone with more experience
Staff there are pretty new

Supervisor is asking Terry to fill-in while Jenny is unexpectedly away

Exercise 5

Short notice / family commitments / not available all shifts/ talk to people at home

Exercise 8

Supervisor	Employee
Doesn't get the full shift covered	Agrees to do some of the shift

Chapter 7

A boss complains

The materials provided in this chapter centre around a dialogue in which a boss complains to an employee about the fact that she has recently been late to work. We wanted to provide models of how criticism can be given from a superior to an employee. This is important to give learners practice in understanding this kind of communication and to prepare them for giving unpleasant feedback as a supervisor themselves.

Migrants often come from cultures with hierarchical workplaces where it is considered normal and appropriate for supervisors to be very direct and blunt in the way they deal with this kind of underperformance. They often find the less direct and more face-saving ways of interacting in many Australian workplaces confusing. If they are used to a more direct style of delivery, they may fail to understand the purpose or gravity of criticism delivered in a less direct, more face-saving manner. When they come to interact in a supervisory capacity themselves, they may therefore fall back on first language experiences and deal with issues in a way that others find aggressive or de-motivating.

The dialogue in this chapter models a boss who is assertive about this need for the employee to change her behaviour, but who empathises with her difficulties and is careful to negotiate the best possible solution.

Learner level

The materials can be used to practise CSWE III, Module A, LO 1, LO 2 and LO 3; Module E, LO 1 and LO 2, and Module F, LO 1 and also develops skills that would be useful in Module C, LO 1 and LO 2, and Module D, LO 1. The materials could also be used within other curriculum frameworks that focus on spoken skills of negotiation, being assertive without aggression and complaining.

Communicative facets

The materials in this chapter address the communicative facets of:

- Listening and understanding
- Being assertive
- Empathising
- Negotiating responsively.

The communication skills tackled are also useful in developing teamwork skills (see Chapter 1 of this volume), in particular:

- Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Exercises

Exercises 1 and 2 lead the learners towards a general understanding of the context, purpose and participants in the dialogue. This allows learners to establish some of the sociopragmatic understandings that underlie the word choices made by the participants. Exercise 2 also begins to draw learners' attention to the strategies the boss

uses to make his purpose clear in ways that allow him to show empathy and be responsive at the same time.

Exercises 3 and 4 focus attention on the different stages in the speech event as a whole. They begin to highlight the kinds of moves that enable the boss to make the criticism in a firm but non-aggressive way by starting with more positive moves (greetings and thanks) and giving Maria a chance to explain what has happened. Learners are then invited to reflect on how such dialogues might be conducted in cultures with which they are familiar. They are also given website links with information about employment and grounds for dismissal.

Exercises 5 to 7 draw out some of the cultural expectations around the issue of punctuality at work, and the ways in which it may be dealt with. Learners are guided towards an understanding of why the employee is late and why this is a problem. This leads them towards an appreciation of how the boss uncovers these in the course of the dialogue – although the boss is making a criticism of the employee, there is listening and understanding as well as responsive negotiation. Learners are also invited to reflect on the ways in which this might be similar to, or different from, the ways in which this situation might be approached in other cultures they are familiar with.

Exercises 8 to 11 focus principally on the language used by the supervisor and the way in which he projects his position firmly without aggression using softeners and colloquial and idiomatic language to maintain an authoritative yet cordial and approachable tone. Exercise 8 focuses on particular items of colloquial language, while Exercise 9 deals with comprehension of the general intention of the supervisor and how it is expressed. Exercises 10 to 11 highlight useful softeners and idioms in the dialogue.

A boss complains

Language skills and values related to communication skill facets: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively, empathising and being assertive

Sample materials

Who are these people?

Where are they?

How do you think they feel?

Vocabulary:

records

unsolvable

disruption

domino effect

shuffle

to get in touch with you

to let someone down

to come up (for example, a situation)



Exercise 1

Listen to Maria and her supervisor talking. Answer the questions.

1. What's the conversation about? _____
2. What's the problem? _____
3. What's the outcome? _____

Exercise 2

Listen again and answer the question.

The supervisor gives Maria a chance to explain her absences first.

What reason does she give?

Exercise 1 and 2 give practice in listening generally and more closely to the text and in making explicit the social and contextual judgments we make as we listen to and interact with people. Exercise 2 draws attention to a strategy used by the supervisor to appear reasonable in his dealings on this issue. Facets practised: listening and understanding and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Exercise 3

Listen again and fill in the missing words.

...our records show _____ or absent uh _____
_____ in the last _____ and I _____, is
there a problem, uh a _____ or something wrong at
home or.... _____?

Maria's boss is quite polite. He greets her and thanks her for coming in before he makes his complaints and then he gives her a chance to explain why she has been late. Underline how he does each of these.

Discuss

Would a supervisor do this in a similar way in your culture? What experiences have you had?

Cultural note

Workplaces and bosses vary a lot, but in this dialogue the supervisor gives Maria a chance to explain why she has been late. Then he makes it clear what is expected. There can be many ways to bring up the issue of lateness. The federal government has procedures relating to unfair dismissal. Visit this website: www.wagenet.gov.au. Also you can visit: www.job-watch.org.au. This is a Victorian Employment Legal Rights Centre, which can give you legal advice about your working rights and conditions.

Exercise 3 focuses attention on the moves the supervisor uses to prepare for the unpleasant act to follow, and offers the opportunity for learners to consider how this type of act would be prepared in the cultures with which they are familiar. This reflection, together with the opportunity to find out more about workplace conditions in Australia, help learners with the sociopragmatic background they need to negotiate this situation. Facets practised: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively, being assertive, empathising and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Exercise 4

There are three stages in this negotiation:

1. Greeting and preparation
2. Negotiation
3. Confirming and checking.

Listen and read. Discuss where the greeting and preparation stage and the confirming and checking stages are.

Exercise 4 continued on page 66

Exercise 4 continued from page 65

Supervisor: Maria hi good morning, thank you for coming in to see me, um just a small problem as you possibly realised there would be, me calling you in, um our records show you've been late or absent uh six times in the last three weeks and I just want to know, is there a problem, uh a personal problem or something wrong at home or... why?

Employee: Well I – well now that you're asking um there is and I really really feel bad about it, um and I know I should have come and talked to you before, um my babysitter has let me down and unfortunately that problem's been unsolvable I've tried everything I possibly could um and I know that by the end of this week I'll – I'll be able to take care of it um...

S: Maria let me put it this way. You're a very good worker and I would hate to lose you. But whenever you're off it means we've got, it's like the domino effect, one thing leads to another, we've got to shuffle staff around and it really, it disrupts the entire production line, the entire production organisation. Now, if it's a problem you can't solve with yours – with your babysitter, perhaps you need to take time off without pay until it's cleared up, um because I don't want to lose you but I also have got to think of the overall picture

E: Um...look I really thank you for understanding and now that I unders – now I und– now that I understand um how your position is and I hadn't realised um what a disruption the whole thing caused you, I promise next time to make sure um if I'm– anything comes up I'll get in touch with you first

S: OK Maria thanks for coming in this morning, and we'll see you here at the office, here– here at work tomorrow morning?

E: Yes yes yes yes thank you

S: OK thank you

E: Bye

Exercise 5

Highlight the reasons Maria gives for why she has been late.

Discuss

Would the reasons she gives be acceptable to bosses you have worked for?
Why/why not?

Did Maria apologise? What do you think she should do?

What would you do in this situation?

Exercises 4 and 5 help learners to identify the stages in and the moves used in a dialogue of this kind, and encourage discussion of how what is regarded as an appropriate reason might vary across cultures. Facets practised: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively, empathising and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Exercise 6

The supervisor says *'Maria, let me put it this way.'*

Then he gives her a number of reasons why her lateness is a problem. He also tells her that there will be consequences if she is late again.

Highlight any reasons that he talks about. Write one of the reasons here.

Exercise 7

Consequences

Look at what the Supervisor says

S: Maria **let me put it this way**. You're a very good worker and **I would hate to lose you**. But whenever you're off it means we've got, it's like the domino effect, one thing leads to another, we've got to shuffle staff around and it really, it disrupts the entire production line, the entire production organisation. Now, if it's a problem you can't solve with yours – with your babysitter, **perhaps you need to take time off without pay** until it's cleared up, um because **I don't want to lose you** but I also have got to think of the overall picture

Discuss:

What would happen if Maria was late again?

How serious do you think the supervisor is? Why do you think so?

What would happen in a similar situation in places you have worked before?

Exercise 8

Read the phrases in the left column below and match with the meaning in the column on the right.

1 Let me put it this way	A You'll lose your job if you continue to come late
2 I would hate to lose you	B You should do something about this now
3 if it's a problem you can't solve with your babysitter, perhaps you need to	C I want to see that you're here on time
4 we'll see you here at the office	D listen carefully

Tone of voice

The tone of voice is firm, not aggressive. This reinforces the supervisor's and worker's positions. They know the supervisor is in charge.

Exercise 8 finishes here

Exercise 9

Discuss

What message is the supervisor giving when he says we'll see you here at the office?

Has Maria got the message?

Exercises 6 to 8 help learners to understand how the supervisor gives a veiled threat supported by reasons, and assists learners to identify some of the idiomatic language used. The focus here on tone of voice highlights an important aspect of interpersonal pragmatics that is often neglected. Exercise 9 helps with understanding an indirect command. The facets practised: listening and understanding, being assertive and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Cultural note

We soften requests in Australian English to make negotiations, including requests and demands, more polite. This gives people the best opportunity to reach agreement without arguing and getting upset. Even the supervisor, someone in a position of authority, may often use softeners.

Exercise 10

Highlight the softeners used by the supervisor below and say how they soften what he says.

1. Just a small problem

2. I just want to know

3. Perhaps you need to take time off without pay

Exercise 10 focuses on how we can soften the impact of what we say and highlights the fact that this is a feature of the supervisor's talk, that is, not only of subordinates to supervisors, but also the other way round. The facets practised: negotiating responsively and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Exercise 11

Find these idioms used in the dialogue. What do they mean? Discuss these with your teacher and classmates.

Exercise 11 continued on page 69

Exercise 11 continued from page 68

Let me down	Domino effect
To take care of	Take time off
Hate to lose you	Cleared up
You're off	Get in touch with

Now match these idioms on the left with the sentences that illustrate their meanings on the right. One has been done for you.

1 Let me down	A As a supervisor, Jason has a lot of different jobs to deal with .
2 To take care of	B We'll discuss it on Monday because you are not working on Sunday.
3 Hate to lose you	C I invited Maria to have lunch with me but she didn't come so I felt disappointed .
4 You're off	D Jason's wife was sick so he had to stay home from work to look after her.
5 Take time off	E The supervisor told Maria that he wouldn't like her to be dismissed .
6 Get in touch with	F Maria found a new babysitter so her problems at work were all gone .
7 Cleared up	G My train was cancelled so I contacted work to tell them that I would be late.

Exercise 11 assists learners with colloquial language and in so doing highlights the generally informal tone used in the dialogue. The facets practised: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively, being assertive, empathising and coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Answers
Exercise 1

1. lateness
2. Maria has been late a number of times recently
3. to be on time, otherwise her pay will be docked and she could lose her job.

Answers continued on page 70

Answers continued from page 69

Exercise 2

Late or absent babysitter

Exercise 5

The reasons Maria gives are:
um my babysitter has let me down
that problem's been unsolvable
I've tried everything

Exercise 6

have to shuffle staff around
disrupts entire production
domino effect

Exercise 8

1D 2A 3B 4C

Exercise 10

1. gentle introduction. It makes it sound less threatening
2. identifying the problem
3. 'perhaps' is a softener but serious. It gives Maria a chance to act before it's too late

Exercise 11

1C 2A 3E 4B 5D 6G 7F

Chapter 8

Colleagues negotiate a time to meet

In this chapter, the focus is on the communication skills involved in negotiating with a colleague. The dialogue models a complex negotiation between two colleagues who are trying to find a mutually convenient time to meet in a busy schedule. This provides an ideal vehicle to highlight different ways of making suggestions as well as face saving ways of rejecting them. Such skills are important in teamwork and for maintaining relationships at work. The expectations around how much softening and face to face work they entail, and how to do this in English, is frequently neglected in language programs.

Exchanges of this kind in Australian contexts often involve requests, suggestions and rejections of suggestions. There is the potential for miscommunication and perceptions of rudeness or uncooperativeness if the suggestions or requests are made too directly, or if they are rejected too abruptly. The exercises included in the materials, therefore, chiefly focus on helping the learner attend to, and reflect on, how to conduct these common (but potentially face-threatening acts) in a way that will be perceived as responsive and polite.

Learner level

The materials can be used to practise CSWE III, Module E, LO 1 and LO 2; Module A, LO 1, LO 2 and LO 3, and Module F, LO 1. They also focus on skills useful in Module C, LO 1 and LO 2. The materials could be used within other curriculum frameworks that focus on spoken skills (negotiation, requesting and rejecting, persuading and being assertive).

Communicative facets

The materials in this chapter address the communicative facets of:

- Listening and understanding
- Negotiating responsively.

The materials also highlight the devices that can be used when we are:

- Being assertive
- Persuading effectively.

These communication skills are pivotal in the teamwork skills involved in:

- Working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion
- Working as an individual and as a member of a team.

Exercises

Exercises 1 to 2 lead the learners towards a general understanding of the context, purpose and participants in the dialogue. This allows learners to establish some of the sociopragmatic factors that underlie the word choices made by the participants. Exercise 1 draws learners' attention to communication features that might indicate the speakers' relative status. Exercise 2 helps them to focus on the way the request is

prepared as well as why and how it is prepared in this way.

Exercises 3 and 4 highlight the form and structure of the request. Some cultural explanation is offered and learners have the opportunity to reflect on what they expect such requests to be like from their own experiences in other languages and cultures. They are invited to consider the extent to which they would prepare for a similar request in the same way. Exercise 4 tackles the overall structure of the request event and the stages it includes.

Exercise 5 assists learners to understand the final solution reached by speakers in the dialogue. This will help them focus in the following exercises on some of the strategies that the speakers use to achieve this solution.

Exercises 6 to 8 help learners identify and focus on how suggestions can be rejected politely in responsive negotiations. Learners are first asked to identify where this happens in the dialogue, and then to focus on how they are performed. They reflect on what expectations might be if someone were rejecting a suggestion at work in a culture with which they are familiar, and whether they would be performed in the same way. Exercise 8 returns to the issue of the use of fillers such as 'well' in signalling our intentions and attitudes, and how these might be different in different languages. A cultural note highlights the use of reasons and alternatives to soften the impact of rejections and avoid sounding too negative.

Exercise 9 highlights the use of some idiomatic English expressions. It offers the opportunity for the learners to practise through role-play some of the skills they have encountered.

Colleagues negotiate a time to meet

Language skills and values related to communication skill facets: listening and understanding, negotiating responsively and being assertive

Sample materials

Who are these people?

Where are they?

Vocabulary

project

Chris – the boss

flexible

totally out

site



Exercise 1

Listen to two colleagues, Philip and Kathy, talking. Answer the questions.

1. What's it about? _____
2. What's the problem? _____
3. What's the outcome? _____

Discuss:

Do you think these two people are at the same level at work? Why/Why not?

Exercise 1 gives practice in listening generally and more closely to the text and in making explicit the social and contextual judgments we make as we listen to and interact with people. Facet practised: listening and understanding,

Exercise 2

Listen and answer the following questions

1. What is Philip's request? _____
2. What does Philip do before he makes his request? _____
3. Why does he do this? _____

Exercise 3

Listen again. Fill in the missing words in the request below.

Look ____ ____ _____ to run into you.

Exercise 3 continued on page 74

Exercise 3 continued from page 73

Because uh Chris said we should _____ to talk about that project

_____ uh and she said _____.

Cultural Note

Preparing for a request. Philip greets, mentions an issue and makes a vague request. He mentions the boss by name to imply that this is a requirement. This is one way of softening the impact of a request from one colleague to another.

Discuss

Would you prepare for a request to a colleague in this way in your culture? Say what would you do and why you would do it that way.

Exercises 2 and 3 allow a focus on an important strategy used to prepare for a request and invite reflection on how such requests might be approached in other cultures. Communication facets practised: listening and understanding, being assertive, negotiating responsively. Teamwork facets practised: working as an individual and as a member of a team.

Exercise 4

There are three stages in this dialogue:

1. Greeting
2. Negotiation
3. Conclusion.

Listen and say where you think the three stages are.

Exercise 5

Listen again and circle the date and time of their final arrangements.

Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
8.00 – 9.00	8.00 – 9.00	8.00 – 9.00
9.00 – 5.00	9.00 – 5.00	9.00 – 5.00
After 5.00	After 5.00	After 5.00

Exercises 4 and 5 provide practice in listening and understanding the stages and content of the negotiation in the dialogue. Communication facet practised: Listening and understanding. Teamwork facet: working as an individual and as a member of a team.

Exercise 5 finishes here

Exercise 6

Now read the text and highlight the parts where one of them rejects a suggestion.

P = Philip

K = Kathy

P: Oh hi Kathy

K: Hi Philip

P: Look I was hoping to run into you

K: Oh

P: Because uh Chris said we should get together to talk about that project sometime uh and she said fairly soon

K: Oh OK so–

P: Uh so do you have any time next week at all?

K: I'm quite OK, I'm quite flexible um how about... Wednesday?

P: No Wednesday's totally out but in fact the only days I've got are Tuesday or Thursday um and Tuesday really is only very early morning

K: Oh um well I've got a job interview um Tuesday morning. Yes, um and that– I mean I won't be back till... say midday

P: No well... well we could do it at eight o'clock in the morning, that– that I can manage, but I–

K: Oh I'd rather not, yeah, no...

P: OK

K: Um...

P: Well my other possibility is um about– after 5 on Thursday I'll be back here, 'cause I've got work to do

K: Well I'm working at the other site on Thursday

P: Oh really?

K: Yeah and I can't get back till about five

P: Mmm

K: Can we meet after five?

P: Um I'd actually prefer a little bit before that um because I've gotta get away as soon as I can, I've got another job to finish

K: Oh... um...

P: So would– how about four on the Thursday, would that be any good?

K: I really can't, I'm tied up at the other centre. Um any other days Philip? I mean

P: Well Wednesday but it'd have to be after five

K: Oh yeah, no that's great

P: Is that alright?

K: Yeah

P: OK um back here?

Exercise 6 continued on page 76

Exercise 6 continued from page 75

K: Yeah we'll meet here at um, so at five did you say?
 P: No a bit after
 K: Yep sure
 P: So about quarter past?
 K: Yeah that sounds great
 P: Alright, if I'm a few minutes late can you wait for me?
 K: Yeah of course
 P: Alright, OK
 K: OK great
 P: Wednesday 5:15
 K: Oh wonderful
 P: OK

Exercise 7

There are points in the dialogue at which one of the colleagues rejects a suggestion made by the other. Compare the rejections you highlighted with your neighbour.

Some give a reason and some give an alternative. Some do neither.

Look at the rejections you have found and write them in the table below under the appropriate heading. One has been done for you.

Rejection with reason	Rejection with alternative
	No well we could do it at 8 o'clock...

Rejection without a reason or alternative

What is the effect of providing a reason or alternative?

Discuss how you would reject a suggestion by a colleague in your culture. Discuss why you would do it in this way, and how far it is similar to the way it is done in the dialogue. Think of a specific example to tell the class.

Exercise 8

Use of **well** in the example given above.

It is used here to avoid making a direct answer; ie, I'm not saying YES and I'm not saying NO.

Exercise 8 continued on page 77

Exercise 8 continued from page 76

Discuss

Think of words in your language that you would use to do the same thing and discuss them with your neighbour.

Cultural note

In Australia, people prefer to avoid saying NO too often or too directly, and so they give reasons why something can't be done or suggest alternatives to support, or sometimes instead of, to avoid rejecting an idea or suggestion directly. This has the effect of softening the impact of a refusal or rejection of an idea. Philip and Kathy work together, and so they are taking care to avoid sounding too negative by softening their rejections in this way.

Exercises 6 to 8 offer the opportunity for learners to focus on how speakers reject an idea or a suggestion without giving offence and to compare how this might be done across different cultures. Communication facets practised: being assertive, negotiating responsively and persuading effectively. Teamwork facets: working as an individual and as a member of a team and working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion.

Exercise 9

Match the idioms from the box with the sentence that matches their meaning.

Idioms:

have got to get away	to be tied up
----------------------	---------------

1. The train leaves at 6:30 so I have to leave no later than five.
2. Bill can't come to the BBQ because he's busy at work.

Exercise 10

Role-play:

Work with a partner to present a role-play to your class or group. Include some ways of saying NO with a reason and/or an alternative. Also try to include using WELL as a filler to avoid saying YES or NO.

Task Card A: Asking a colleague to work for you

You ask a colleague work for you one afternoon next week, because you have a doctor's appointment. S/he can do the same for you at a later time.

Task Card B: Swapping with a colleague

You have signed up for some computer training at work. The company is running several sessions because all employees have to do it. You realise this

Exercise 10 continued on page 78

Exercise 10 continued from page 77

time is not suitable for you and you have to change it. Arrange a swap with a colleague.

Exercise 9 highlights some informal vocabulary used in the dialogue, while Exercise 10 offers free practice in the use of the features covered in this unit. Communication facets practised: listening and understanding, being assertive, persuading effectively, negotiating responsively. Teamwork facets: working as an individual and as a member of a team and working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion.

Answers

Exercise 1

1. Making a meeting time in work time
2. Both are busy so it's difficult to find a suitable time
3. They agree to meet on Wednesday at 5:15

Exercise 2

1. He wants to arrange a time to meet
2. He greets her and tells her that the coming request comes from the boss
3. To show that he is friendly and establishes that the need for his request comes from the boss before he asks for a meeting time

Exercise 5

Wednesday after 5.00

Exercise 7

Rejection with reason

Oh um well I've got a job interview

Well I'm working at the other site

I really can't, I'm tied up

Rejection without a reason or alternative

No, Wednesday's totally out

Oh, I'd rather not

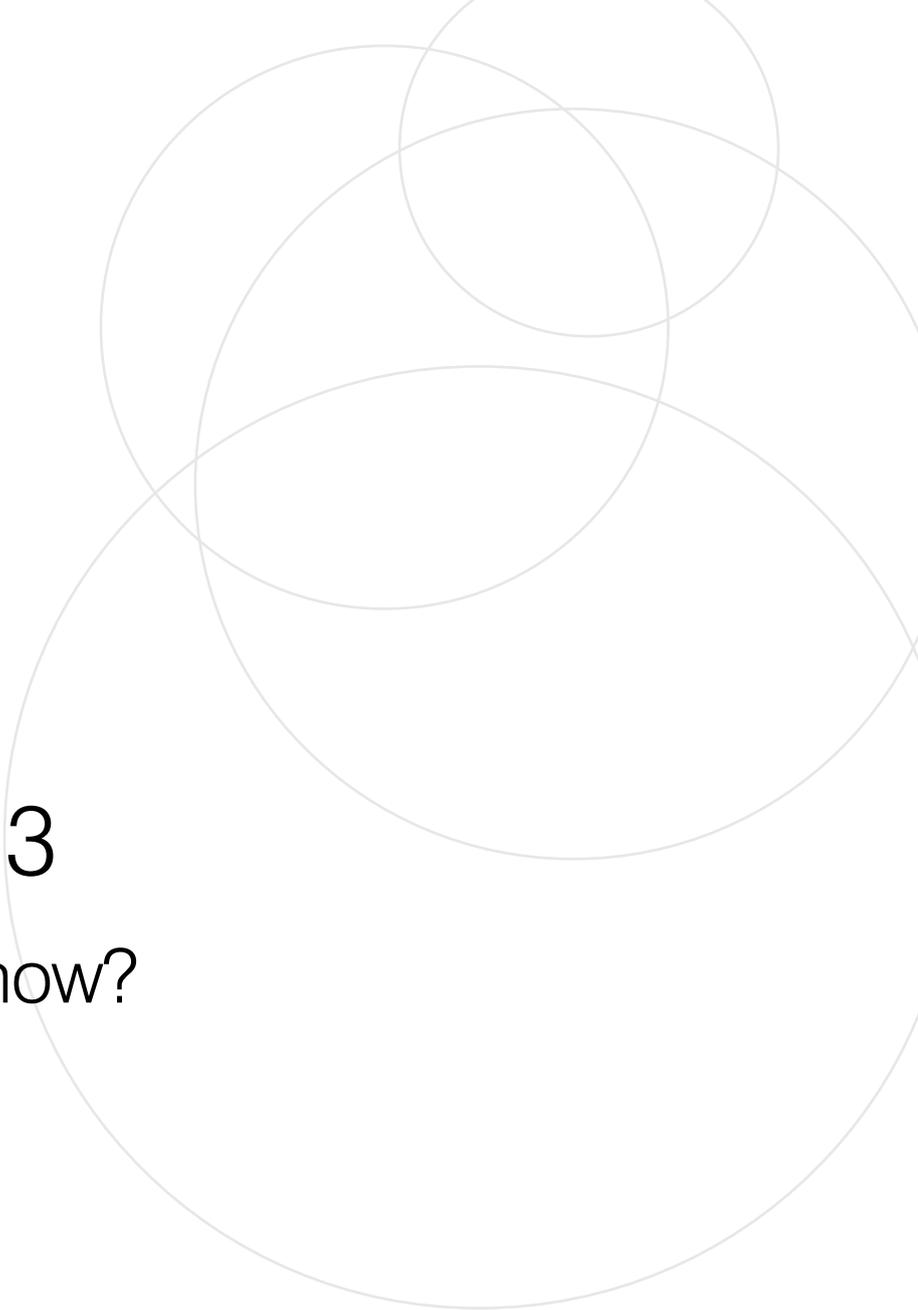
Rejection with alternative

No well we could do it at 8 o'clock...

Um I'd actually prefer a little bit before that...

Exercise 9

1. have got to get away
2. to be tied up



Section 3

Where to now?

Chapter 9

Implications for communication skills training

This volume has provided insight into the challenges faced by adult learners from other language and culture backgrounds preparing for the way communication is conducted in the Australian workplace, and has highlighted the inadequacy of the general descriptions of employability skills in addressing these. The micro-investigation of the demands of specific communicative situations and the mapping of some of these onto the facets of communication and teamwork skills have enabled a more focused insight into the ingredients of successful communication in Australian workplaces. The explicit sample materials developed on the basis of this investigation illustrate how these skills and features of communication can be addressed with learners through the use of models and reflective cross-cultural comparison. They also illustrate how learners can become researchers of communication themselves.

The processes and products of the projects reported here suggest important future directions. They have underscored the need for more detailed, culturally specific descriptions of what we mean by communication skills, as well as explicit communications oriented materials to tackle these.

No matter how detailed our descriptions, or explicit and evidence-based our materials, we will never be able to cover all facets of communication for all cross-cultural situations – this would be an enormous research and materials development undertaking. The learners themselves, therefore, have to become investigators so that they can gain an understanding of the situations in which they find themselves. The procedure used in developing the materials included here suggests ways in which learners can do this for their own development by collecting and analysing their own communication ‘data’.

By highlighting the fundamentally culture-specific nature of communication, the projects reported here have, crucially, also drawn attention to the importance of cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence in all workplace communications.

Recognising and tackling the cultural basis of communication

The discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 have highlighted the inadequacies of the current descriptions of communication skills which lack detail and are based on specific sets of unacknowledged cultural assumptions. This may cause less difficulty for native speakers who can draw on shared and tacit communicative values and make use of various aspects of interpersonal pragmatics automatically, often quite unconsciously. But non-native speakers are at risk of failing to understand how communication works in a workplace, and how it is achieved.

Because adults arriving as migrants to Australia bring with them assumptions and cultural values based on their previous experiences in other culture, they may fail to notice, or recognise, the ingredients of what is considered to be good communication in their new community. Under such circumstances, misunderstandings can arise in which unintended impressions, and even offence, may be given or taken without any clear understanding of how this has happened. This volume has highlighted the somewhat mono-cultural basis of the approach taken under the AQF to communications training, and the need to counteract this with more detailed knowledge of what is

actually involved in the facets that form the basis of good communication skills in Australia.

Of course, the very general nature of the descriptions can be seen as an advantage in that they can be used across all industries and in all contexts. However, the culture-specific basis of these skills needs to be acknowledged so that how good communication works in different contexts can be specified. We cannot afford to ignore the need to provide explicit and culturally aware descriptions of the features and skills that may be expected in the Australian (or any other) context. And we need to provide these in sufficient detail so that they can be tackled by learners who do not necessarily share the same cultural assumptions about what styles and features of communication may be appropriate in a particular context. Teachers and trainers also need to be made aware of what these features are and how they work so that they can be tackled consciously and explicitly in ways which make sense to learners from all backgrounds. This calls for explicit approaches to awareness-raising materials and teaching and learning.

The sample materials provided in Section 2 use culture-specific models of communicative facets encountered in the workplace, and also provide opportunities for learners to analyse, reflect and try out what they have learned. While they seem to have been much appreciated by the teachers with whom they were trialled, these were ESL teachers who are already familiar with some of the difficulties adults from other language backgrounds may encounter when learning about how to communicate through English. Their training and experience have already heightened their awareness of the need to make cultural assumptions and comparisons transparent (their own and their learners'). Many have considerable cross-cultural experience outside as well as inside Australia through their work with adults from other backgrounds.

The facets of communications are, however, more routinely taught and assessed under the AQF by trainers and teachers with other professional backgrounds, and from other sectors, who may not have this kind of multicultural experience. The need here is even more acute, therefore, for not only more specific information about the nature of how communication works in Australian English, but also for professional development and teaching materials which are explicit about the skills involved and sensitive to differences across languages and cultures.

The focus in this volume has been on understanding some of the cultural values and features of interpersonal pragmatics found in workplace situations in one particular language and cultural context – English in Australia. We will, however, increasingly need to look beyond this to a focus on *intercultural* rather than cross-cultural competence (Byram, 1997; Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco, 1999).

In a working environment where communication across cultures is routine, the enormity of the task of understanding all the features of communication relevant to all the cultures of the world with which we will come into contact is unrealistic. Our orientation needs to be towards developing the ability to appreciate the existence and the importance of the kind of values and features examined in this volume, to appreciate that these may vary across cultures and that we may not know exactly what they are or how they work. Active training in strategies that will enable us to communicate sensitively with speakers from a wide range of cultures would help everyone, native speakers, as well as people from other language backgrounds, work more effectively in multicultural workplaces both at home and overseas.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this volume, preparing newly arrived migrants for the workplace is not simply a matter of providing basic language skills. If they are to thrive, progress and start to use their potential, they must also acquire the skills to understand how workplaces function and how people communicate there. These are the very same fundamental skills in intercultural communication that we all need to meet the communication challenges of the future: the skills of appreciating and understanding the existence of other ways of doing things in interaction.

My hope is that the approach taken in this volume will offer some insight into how we can better understand the way we make use of the devices and features of interpersonal pragmatics in the languages we speak, as well as the communicative values underpinning the choices we make. We can all then use this kind of inquiry to become curious and investigate for ourselves how successful communication is accomplished, not only in cultures with which we are familiar, but also in other, less familiar contexts. This kind of approach can lay the foundation for a fuller appreciation of the ways in which things may be done differently in different communicative contexts. We will then be equipped to seriously tackle the communication issues faced in the workplace, not only by migrants, but by all of us.

References

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Crozet, C., Liddicoat, A., & Lo Bianco, J. (1999). Introduction: Intercultural competence: From language policy to language education. In J. Lo Bianco, A. Liddicoat & C. Crozet (Eds.), *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education* (pp. 1–20). Melbourne: Language Australia.

