



Labour Market Dynamics
Research Programme

Innovative research in employment

WORKPLACE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS:

EMPLOYERS AND IMMIGRANT EMPLOYEES

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INTRODUCTION

Underemployment and unemployment of highly qualified immigrants has been widely acknowledged as a problem in New Zealand for at least a decade. The popular press, government reports, academic research, and community and settlement groups have brought these issues to the fore (e.g. Benson-Rea, Haworth, and Rawlinson, 1998; Henderson, 2003; Henderson et al, 2001; Henderson, Trlin and Watts, 2006; New Zealand Herald, 2005; Lidgard and Yoon, 1998; Migrant experience, 2005; Story, 2005; Trlin et al, 2004; Watts and Trlin, 2005). According to this literature, many well-qualified immigrants and tertiary graduates who speak English as an additional language (EAL) cannot find employment here that builds on their skills, education and experience, despite an environment with notable skills shortages. A number of barriers to employment have been identified in the research. They include employer attitudes, devaluing of overseas qualifications and the paradoxical need to have New Zealand work experience in order to obtain a New Zealand job (for example Benson-Rea et al, 1998; Henderson et al, 2001; and Trlin et al, 2004).

However, the bulk of the research identifies English language proficiency, including accent, as a major obstacle to appropriate work placement. Immigrants surveyed for the New Zealand Immigration Service (2004) report on immigrant experiences identified English language proficiency as one of the main factors in finding work. Eighteen percent of immigrants with New Zealand work experience believed that good English language skills had helped them find work, and twenty-four percent of those not working named difficulties with English as one main impediment to employment (2004:86). Both immigrants and employers in Benson-Rea et. al. (1998) work most frequently reported language and communication skills as barriers to employment. Recent findings from the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme at Massey University show that employers identify language as crucial to hiring (McLaren and Spoonley, 2005; McLaren, Maidment, and Spoonley, 2004). Moreover, a 2006 report on employers' and employment agencies' views on language proficiency and the recruitment of professional immigrants (Henderson et. al., 2006) found that while there was some variation in expectations of language proficiency, the "minimum 'Modest' (IELTS 5-equivalent) level of English was rarely considered adequate for any position" (Henderson et. al., 2006:23). The report also found that "some recruiters and employers expected even immigrant applicants to have a New Zealand accent, especially for senior positions" (Henderson et. al., 2006:25). Accordingly, the government raised the English language requirement for skilled immigrants in 2002 to IELTS 6.5, a "competent user" (Henderson et al, 2006), a move that may also have raised expectations that language would no longer be an issue in employment. Yet anecdotal evidence has suggested that employers still often find language to be a problem and both employers and immigrants are often frustrated, thinking their language should be adequate.

Clearly, the New Zealand economy is losing an important potential contribution from skilled immigrants, whose talent New Zealand hopes to attract and utilise (Ho, 2001; Spoonley, 2003). Furthermore, not only does the research indicate economic loss for New Zealand but reports also attest to the emotional, social and economic damage to individuals and their families (e.g. Butcher et al, 2006; Firkin et al, 2004; Lidgard and Yoon, 1999).

THE STUDY

In this current context, the study investigates language and communication issues from the perspectives of two categories: (1) EAL professionals who are employed in their field and (2) managers in companies that employ them. Questions of language and communication need to be unpacked so that language educators, settlement services, employers, EAL immigrants and policy makers can understand language needs in more depth than a numerical proficiency level can provide. Investigating employers' and EAL employees' perspectives on communication experiences in the workplace can add to our understanding of these issues. The study aims to capture participants' hindsight and reflections on their own employment experiences, as managers or employees. It attempts to build on findings of the existing research and also opens up issues for further questioning. It presents insights but also uncovers contradictions, and identifies directions for further research and policy adjustment. The study reported here comprises the interview phase of a two-part project; the second part, an observational case study of immigrant professionals in the workplace, is currently underway.

Participants

The two groups of interview participants consisted of managers in ten successful New Zealand companies that employed EAL professional immigrants, and seventeen tertiary-educated EAL immigrants and refugees. All the interviews took place in the Auckland area.

Among the managers, one dropped out and two were also immigrants, but since their work included responsibility for hiring and recruitment, they were interviewed as managers. All were native speakers of English or spoke with native-like fluency and accuracy. Their profiles, listed below, are general and brief to maintain anonymity:

Table 1: Employers

Position	Business	Ethnicity	Workforce
Chief Executive	Manufacturing (international)	NZ Pakeha	EAL production line and ethnically diverse middle management.
Director	Logistics (international)	NZ Pakeha	Ethnically diverse, all levels
Managing Director	Manufacturing and Technology (international)	NZ immigrant (English education)	Ethnically diverse, all levels
Business Manager	Manufacturing (international)	NZ Pakeha	EAL production line and ethnically diverse middle management.

Human Resources Manager	Manufacturing and Technology (international)	NZ Pakeha	Increasingly hiring immigrants above production line work
Principal	Public Primary School	NZ Pakeha	Mainly hiring immigrants as relief teachers
Branch Manager	Banking (international)	NZ immigrant (English education)	Ethnically diverse workforce, mostly at entry level
Managing Director and Accounts Manager	Engineering Consulting (SME)	NZ Pakeha	Some EAL employees
Operations Manager and Human Resources Officer	Construction (international)	NZ Pakeha	Ethnically diverse at entry level, professional immigrants are largely native English speakers with some EAL

As Table 1 shows, seven of the nine employers interviewed were New Zealand Pakeha while the two immigrant managers had been educated in English. The two manufacturing employers worked in the same company. Two interviews were conducted with pairs of managers and were each counted as single interviews. All but two of the companies were international, based in Australasia, and one self-identified as a small enterprise.

Seventeen EAL immigrant professionals were interviewed. All were employed in a field related to their educational background and/or in positions above entry level. Because of the small number of EAL professional employees in New Zealand and the fact that some interviewees have high local profiles, they are described briefly, with background and current work listed separately to help maintain anonymity. They came from the following countries:

- India (6)
- Vietnam (2)
- China (2)
- Iraq (2)
- Sri Lanka (2)
- Somalia
- Ethiopia
- Indonesia.

Most had degrees from their home countries, ranging from undergraduate degrees to doctorates, medical degrees and law degrees. Some had changed professions by obtaining New Zealand qualifications in other areas. For example, one immigrant, who had been a banker back home with a mathematics degree, obtained qualifications here as a secondary school teacher and became a maths teacher. Two who worked as

interpreters in their fields had qualified here. All the employees had some English before they arrived in New Zealand, ranging from a few years of school English as a foreign language to a full English language education, as was the case with the Indian immigrants.

Table 2: Employee Occupations

New Zealand	Country of origin
Assistant Manager	Lecturer in Computing and Accounting
Branch Manager, Banking	Banking Executive
Sales Manager, computers	Computers
Assistant Manager, retail	Dancer
Manager and Health Interpreter	Doctor
Financial Accountant	Financial Accountant
Accounts Assistant	Financial Accountant
Production and Supply Coordinator	Accountant
Accounts Manager	Executive Secretary
Assistant Accountant, Payroll	First job in NZ
Asset Planner, electricity	Electrical Engineer
Electrical Engineer	Design Engineer and Project Supervisor
Data Communications Engineer	Electronics and Telecommunications Engineer
Tutor (PTE)	Lecturer and Educational Administrator
Secondary Teacher	Banker
Supervisor	Lawyer
Interpreter	First job in NZ

Interviewees' English proficiency was not formally assessed but their spoken English ranged from very clear, fluent and accurate to language that required sympathetic listening from the interviewers, all experienced EAL educators. Language competence, except in two cases, did not seem to relate to occupation. The pronunciation of one high level engineer was often very difficult to follow in the interview, as were the sentence patterns and language choice of a manager who dealt with other employees regularly. Most immigrants were past clients of the Auckland Regional Migrant Services (ARMS); others were approached through word-of-mouth. Managers were often known to ARMS or approached through word-of-mouth.

Research Procedures

Interviews focused on recruitment and job search, the nature of communication at work, challenges for those who speak English as an additional language and communication strategies. Two ESOL advisors from ARMS, Marian Patrizio and Angela Yatri, helped find participants, Massey University-approved ethical protocols

were followed and interviews were arranged either at workplaces or in the ARMS offices. Most immigrant interviewees were identified from ARMS lists of clients who had agreed to be recontacted for follow-up or research. They were advised of the purpose and general themes of the interview when meeting times were arranged. Interviewees signed consent forms and received information sheets describing the project. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and summarised for interviewees to review and correct. Patrizio and Yatri also took part in many of the interviews and contributed to early analysis of the data. A Stakeholder Report was sent to all interviewees and others consulted during the project development.

Interviews included a brief discussion of the interviewees' background, including employers' recruitment practices and employees' job search, but focussed on job descriptions, including everyday work tasks and communicative activities, communication challenges and communication strategies of EAL immigrants. The open-ended discussion format allowed interviewees to elaborate on information in depth and to voice individual perspectives not necessarily pre-selected by interviewers.

As a small qualitative study, the research findings are not intended to be generalisable to all situations. Instead, the study aims for a depth of information that is not always apparent in quantitative studies and for a descriptive clarity that allows readers to apply it to their own contexts. Findings were analysed interpretively (cf Davidson and Tolich, 2003; Miller, 2005) and linked to other relevant research. The interviews were analysed for recurrent themes as well as commentary that stood out.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

Hiring and Recruitment

Besides skills and qualifications, many employers emphasised looking for people who “fit” their company. Applicants’ personal qualities and potential contribution and those “able to apply their knowledge to the workings and objectives of the company” were important. In the words of the bank manager:

I hire for attitude and I train for skill. I look for passion for customers, for getting targets no matter what. Then they’ll go that extra mile -- results driven.

Indeed, hiring based on judgements about character is not uncommon, particularly in service industries. For example, Hunter (2004) cites the Front Desk Manager in a large urban hotel as looking first for “personality” in job applicants, saying that if an applicant in an interview doesn’t “smile in the first minute ... I won’t hire them.” (Hunter 2004:111)

Some explicitly named immigrants’ desirable personal qualities, as these two noted:

It takes a lot for people to pack their bags up with their entire family and move in to a new country. Now that’s character, there’s a challenge.

Overseas people are highly motivated. They’ve left their country, their friends and family to come here. With them your company can move forward and progress.

Employers described two ways they assessed job applicants. The first was careful screening processes. As one manager described it:

Most likely two interviews, ... some kind of simulation, ... a problem to solve to see how they work together, ... a technical test ... We determine their oral skills through the course of the interview.

The second strategy applied to larger organizations with the flexibility to hire at different levels. They were sometimes able to offer immigrants part-time work or employment at a lower level and observe their performance and attitude on the job before considering promotion. In the words of one manager confident about his observations of employees’ work:

It shows up pretty quick, it really does. If they’re honest about making a go of it, then they’re straight up with you at that lower level and then they prove themselves and you start getting to other things ... It’s funny little things people show themselves up very, very quickly.

Yet another employer pointed out that this strategy can sometimes backfire for ambitious immigrants who do not understand the work culture. She described:

...migrants who have a tertiary qualification, who have applied for production jobs and are very determined to not stay there. Their strategy is to try and impress the boss, try to do the things that get attention, but often it is at the expense of the team. ... That goes down really badly here.

As this employer observed, immigrants are aware of the potential opportunities from accepting lower level work but do not always know what is most valued in New Zealand work cultures.

Benson-Rea et al (1998) critique such subjectivity (e.g. judgements of attitude, passion, or honesty) in recruitment. In calling for clear interview protocols focused on job descriptions and personal specifications, they say “the absence of an interview protocol reduces the chance of recruiting the right person and introduces the potential for bias and, potentially, discrimination” (Benson-Rea et. al.,1998:43). In this, they are consistent with research dating from the 1980s (e.g. Akinnaso and Agirotutu, 1982; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz, Jupp, and Roberts, 1991; Kerekes, 2006), which attests to widespread subjective and tacit judgements by interviewers in “gatekeeping” situations, in which the representative of an institution determines whether an outsider is allowed access to, or benefits from, the institution. These researchers have found that “failed gatekeeping encounters ... are often attributed to miscommunication ... which may reflect cultural, educational, or ideological differences” (Kerekes, 2006:28). The 1980s and early 1990s research describes numerous cases of such failure in cross-cultural situations where interviewers misread interactional styles of interviewees from other cultures. Conversely, Kerekes’ case study analysis of successful job interviews in an American employment agency found that all the candidates were successful at impressing on interviewers their “trustworthiness”. They did so by establishing “rapport and solidarity” with the interviewers, showing flexibility in work assignments, and presenting themselves as “positive, competent employees” despite their varying qualifications, first language or English language ability. The degree of communicative competence required to manage intense encounters like job interviews would clearly present a significant challenge to EAL immigrants, a challenge somewhat more daunting than simply learning how to answer interview questions rehearsed in correct English.

The cultural mismatch analysis above may go part way to explaining employers’ demands for New Zealand work experience. Experience may give immigrants exposure to the kind of interactional style common in New Zealand workplaces. Some of the migrant interviewees also shed light on sources of hiring barriers. Several acknowledged risks that employers were taking in hiring them as unknowns. For example, these two interpreted the employer’s position:

Thinking of Kiwi employers’ point of view, when you employ a new person, you always want the best. Of course you will see if they have experience or not in this field, and you want to know how long they’ve been in this country and whether they can do the job or not because you’re going to spend a lot of money.

You are just a person they have never seen; they don’t know anything [about you] ... You haven’t been here for long, so you don’t sound the way they

sound, and if you can manage to sound like a Kiwi, it could help you. If the person takes time and gets to know you, possibly he may appreciate what you can offer and what kind of knowledge you have and how much personality you have.

In other words, employers are venturing into the unknown when they hire new immigrants, especially considering New Zealand's relatively recent acceptance of large numbers of skilled migrants from non-western cultures. Unfamiliar communication styles for establishing rapport and positive self-presentation, inexperience in western interview situations and unknown background and qualifications can all contribute to wariness on the employer's part. Even when immigrants are well coached in interviewing, one negative experience with an employee can affect a small company's future hiring. As one such employer commented regretfully, reflecting on his company's rejection of many migrant applicants: "There is a big skill shortage in this country; we could have had 20 more staff in this place if we'd been able to take these people on, so it is affecting our business as well". He went on to say, "We don't have the facilities in our business [to mentor new employees] because it is so competitive; we don't have the money to do this". Prior New Zealand work experience might signal to employers a lowered risk. Balancing a set of factors seems to be important in hiring immigrant professionals, viz., risk of the unknown, need due to skills shortages and investment required to train new employees. In relation to this study, the unknowns of language and communication style may weigh on this set of factors.

Language And Communication

Employers spoke of English language in terms of effective, goal-directed communication. One manager wanted his production workers' English to be adequate to pass a supervisor's course. Others mentioned employees and job applicants whose English was difficult to understand, especially their pronunciation. One expressed concern about an employee understanding English on the work site and the potential for serious problems with emergencies or health and safety. However, only one, the school principal, spoke of the need for highly accurate English, perhaps understandably with a vested interest in children's language development. But he also framed his standards in terms of the goals and relationships in the primary school context. Others named particular circumstances, such as answering telephones or writing formal reports, where correct English was vital. These findings were similar to those in Henderson et. al.'s (2006) survey study, in which employers noted telephone and face-to-face communication with clients and colleagues among the top three language-related problems experienced by professional EAL employees. One manager was explicit about language proficiency affecting the company reputation:

We've got to put them out to a client, and if we put someone whose English isn't up to scratch out there, then it reflects badly on us.

Yet when pressed about precise language form, they tended not to be specific, saying, for example, "We don't put a lot of emphasis on formal written language here ... we're looking for those technical skills; we're looking for the ability to work in a team and communicate within a team". That is, they saw communication as vital to the

smooth functioning of the workplace, “for even on the factory floor, you have to communicate between shifts”. These findings differ from Henderson et. al.’s (2006), whose survey presented employers with a rating scale somewhat parallel to the IELTS bands, with “New Zealand accent” added. Henderson et. al. (2006) were disturbed that their respondents seemed to have unrealistically high expectations of language proficiency, often including New Zealand accents. This was not apparent in the current study. The differences in outcomes may relate to the different methods – asking employers to express their needs based on experience with EAL employees (the current study), as opposed to a relatively abstract rating on a descriptive scale (Henderson et al, 2006). Generally, they emphasised the importance of communication, albeit not sharply conceptualised; to quote one, “It’s more about communication and communication style”.

Ironically, their views contrast with the typical framework by which ESOL educators and governments consider language proficiency. For the most part, language education breaks down language proficiency into components such as fluency, coherence and accurate, correct use and comprehension of linguistic forms applied to particular generic tasks. The New Zealand Immigration Service has adopted an international test with scores correlated to generic descriptors of proficiency, based on these components, to screen skilled migrant applicants (IELTS, 2006). Employers’ views of language proficiency might be seen as unsophisticated; however, they unwittingly conform to the more communicative, holistic theories of language use first introduced by Dell Hymes (1971) in which context of use figures centrally and competence varies accordingly. For example, aural language competence on a generic language test administered through a recorded conversation or lecture may differ considerably from comprehension of telephone explanations of computer applications. EAL speakers are under a different kind of pressure when engaged in work on the telephone, which requires rapid verbal response as well as accurate listening and comprehension strategies and thus need to draw on different competencies.

To put it another way, tests and language classes may prepare EAL learners to meet language standards in a generic setting, which may not apply to workplace situations. At the same time, it is important to note that the interviews did not reveal what levels of accuracy or inaccuracy were acceptable to employers other than the school principal and, quite understandably, they were not always highly articulate about language description and development. This perspective may help explain the success of Kerekes’ successful job applicants, whose English language proficiency varied and it may contribute to understanding of the range of language accuracy among the employed EAL migrants in this study.

Several employers pointed out the reluctance of immigrants reluctance to be upfront when they did not understand something. One described the strategies he used:

I’ve become adept at saying, “This is what I want to achieve” and making it very succinct, simple, and non-threatening, but quite clear. Then I go back and confirm what it is that you think I’m trying to achieve.

Despite such strategies, employers expressed frustration at immigrants who tended to nod and say, “yes, yes” when it became clear they had not understood at all. One

employer told of an EAL engineer who misunderstood instructions and set a pressure switch incorrectly, resulting in a considerable loss of money and time for both the employer and the client company. Some attributed this to a need to save face, that “it’s an Asian culture thing where they don’t like to admit that they don’t understand”, or that “they think they have to do it all by themselves.” For the most part, employers also reported that they did not hesitate to tell immigrant employees about problems with accent or comprehension.

Employers appeared to have intuitive conceptions of language development. That is, they attributed language improvement to personal qualities of hard work and diligence. For example, one manager spoke of a Chinese accountant whose written English improved dramatically over time. His perception of her language improvement appeared closely related to his perception of her overall character, as can be seen in this exchange:

Manager: She went out of her way to start learning and developing her skills in English and I can now see every time we communicate to her in email she reads things and she understands ... the fundamental thing is she knew her job so the employer was prepared to go the extra mile to support her whatever she did. Many times in the past she’d come to me and I’d correct her grammatically ...

Judy: What did she do that showed you she was going out of her way to develop her English skills?

Manager: Personality was great, attitude was great, tidiness was great, she knew her stuff.

In other words, he appeared to be judging her on character traits rather than language ability.

Another employer spoke disparagingly about an ex-employee who did not try, who read magazines and spoke in her own language in the office. This perception may reflect a popular view that EAL migrants should only speak English to show their commitment to the new culture. For instance, another employer stated strongly that “they need to be aware when they come here that they got to speak English in the home”. This view often ignores the fact that EAL immigrants have bilingual and bicultural lives, and echoes the government refrain cited in Spoonley (2003:10), that “it is for immigrants to make the adjustment”. Moreover, as will be seen from the EAL employee interviews, many immigrants observed that their language improved over time with regular, sustained interaction in the workplace.

Communication, Culture and “Fitting In”

Employers noted several aspects of workplace communication that they considered challenging for immigrants which they often attributed to cross-cultural differences. These ranged from what we might see as inappropriate nonverbal greetings, such as bowing or standing when managers enter the room, to more significant issues, such as those discussed below.

One concern, which several employers attributed to hierarchical workplace organisation in other cultures, related to taking initiative on the job and interacting with the employer. One commented, for example, that “migrant employees often tell me what they think I want to hear”. He found that to be a problem when he actually wanted to hear employees’ opinions. Another concerned employer observed that in New Zealand, professionals are expected to be innovative and claimed that, despite laudable capabilities, immigrants, in their company experience:

... never move outside the square, so the employer [client] at the other end comes back and says the job is okay, but it didn’t really strike any high notes.

The employer suggested the cause might be cultural differences or the lack of English competence. The school principal likewise noted:

I can’t think of an immigrant teacher that has ever been to see me to complain or to ask for help. Kiwi teachers are knocking on my door all the time.

A second concern was also linked to work hierarchy in other cultures, namely interpersonal interaction on the job. For example, one manager referred to immigrant engineers’ difficulties with subordinates:

The Kiwi culture is very much about proving yourself. People don’t accept you because of your qualifications; you’ve got to prove your ability, and quite often the migrants struggle with that concept. They think that they should be accepted and respected because of the fact they’ve got a qualification whereas Kiwis want to see the ability as well. I mean I’m talking about the interaction in the work place.

Several employers said that immigrant employees tend just to do the job, that is, perform their tasks and ignore the important social and interactive aspects of work life. Such comments ranged across sectors, for example:

Teachers also come along expecting to teach a subject... and tend not to have that fine balance between being open and friendly and yet maintaining a distance. (primary education)

I don’t like the guys to come to work and be stern all day. (plastics manufacturing)

There’s a healthy irreverence here; as in most Kiwi organisations ... people joke and make fun of each other, ... some of the migrant workers find that difficult. (design and technology manufacturing)

The people that don’t socialise ostracise themselves. (construction)

While it may appear to immigrants that social interaction is an “extra-curricular” activity, these employers saw it as an important contributor to smooth workplace functioning. The importance of social interaction, particularly small talk and humour in the workplace, is also confirmed in the language in the workplace studies (e.g.

Holmes, 2000a; 2000b; 2004). Holmes (2000a) defines small talk at work on a continuum from core business talk to phatic communion (i.e. minimally informative small talk). Her research shows that what may often be considered minimally important socialising has a number of important functions in the workplace. For example, it serves as transitional talk between segments of work-focussed activity; it expresses solidarity relationships as well as status relationships, depending on how it is managed. For these reasons, Holmes claims that it is a vital component in workplace participation.

Yet two other issues may complicate EAL employees' ability to "fit in". One is the notion professed by several managers that New Zealand workplaces have flat hierarchies and that newcomers fail to grasp the implications, namely the responsibility placed on employees to take initiative, to "go the extra mile" for the organisation.. The flattened hierarchy is identified widely as a feature of the new workplace, in contrast to more traditional management styles of the past. Yet as workplace researchers have noted, pure flattened hierarchies seldom exist in practice (e.g. Holmes, 2000a; Rhodes and Scheeres, 2004). In fact, citing Sollitt-Morris (1996), Holmes (2000a:52) observes that "in many New Zealand workplaces, in response to an egalitarian work ethic, rather than being relinquished, power seems to have gone underground". What some managers speak of as flattened hierarchies may instead be a more friendly, casual style of workplace interaction, that is, small talk and humour which, as Holmes posits, is intertwined with the context of work and work relationships. In sum, these complex workplace social practices, tacitly assumed by New Zealand employers and experienced workers, may not be at all obvious to EAL immigrants (Holmes, 2000b).

The second issue involves attributions of different communication styles to cultural difference. Managers tended to perceive the lack of initiative of many EAL employees and the avoidance of social engagement, as well as non-verbal practices like bowing or standing, as related to other cultures. In one sense, such views could be considered a kind of cultural reductionism, that is looking at a complex situation in an overly simplified way, which could easily lead to stereotyping. Similarly, Lidgard and Yoon (citing Li, 1992), in discussing Korean entrepreneurs in New Zealand, assert that:

...simple cultural explanations ... are no longer adequate in explaining the success or failure of particular migrant groups. The environment into which the entrepreneurs move and the institutions through which they develop their business connections are also of critical importance to migrant success (Lidgard and Yoon, 1992:268-269).

In fact, there were some signs in these interviews of possible shifts away from overly reductionist views to more nuanced understandings of immigrants' lives. One employer, for example, acknowledged the challenges of resettlement and job searches as contributing to employees' lack of self-confidence. And cultural explanations of difference may represent an understanding that moves beyond attributing difference in communication style to cognitive deficits or undesirable personal habits, as is often the case in racialised stereotypes.

Immigrant Employers

Finally, with respect to communication and fitting in, we might look more closely at the two immigrant managers. Of Indian ethnicity, both had been educated in English medium contexts since primary school. One immigrated nearly two decades ago, completed 7th form and tertiary qualifications in New Zealand. He had been at his current company for twelve years. He attributed his success to studying here, going through a “huge learning curve”, but also to his philosophy that:

You might still have your very strong heritage backgrounds as an Indian or any other race, ... [but] I think it is important to try and fit in to a particular society... from the way you portray yourself, the way you dress, everything goes hand in hand.

The second immigrant employer had been in New Zealand for five years, with an MBA from his home country and previous employment as a relationship manager in a bank back home. On his arrival here, he first obtained a clerical job in a bank through an employment agency, later found a better job with his current bank and worked his way up to branch manager. He reflected readily on his experience as an immigrant professional, attributing his success partly to individual determination to overcome negative attitudes and doubt, often from compatriot immigrants:

When I came into the country there were instances when I was told you need to discount the years of experience you have; you've got to tone down your CV. You've got to forget about earning a \$100 000 salary because that is never going to happen. Another migrant friend of mine said to me, “Forget about being a manager. Those dreams are not going to get fulfilled”, and I said to myself, ... I'll prove you wrong. Migrants are very self-confident when they take that move from their parent country to come over here, but from self-confidence when they come here, they get into a mode of self-doubt. They start doubting themselves, they start doubting their capabilities because this country is not willing to give them that first break or give them a job on par with what they were doing back home.

Yet he also attributed his success to “fitting in” and reflected on a CEO job rejection in his earlier years here:

In hindsight I know if I was successful in that role [job application] it would have been an absolute disaster because I knew absolutely nothing about the country and its culture and things that happen around. I knew that I was capable but you still need to know your surroundings to be capable in any job.

He explained:

If you go in to a meeting, conversations [are] around sports, current affairs, all these kinds of things. I don't say that I'm clued on to what happens in politics right now, but at least you need to have a basic understanding who heads the Reserve Bank in New Zealand, what's happening, who's the main opposition party, who is the main governing body here, all those kinds of things.

And finally, he articulated what other managers may have been alluding to when they identified socialising as a problem. But his explanation countered the cultural difference perspective of many employers in referring to the situation. In his view, the important issues were the notion of belonging, not knowing what it might take to belong and avoidance of missteps that might jeopardise group membership:

I see a lot of us ... when we come here, we don't find ourselves a part of the in-group or the clique; that's because maybe we don't know what to say or what to talk. We just tend to stay aloof because we don't know what to say, or what we might say may be conceived to be wrong.

Aside from their perceptions about culture and communication, the language and communication style of these two managers illustrated their affinity with fitting in. They spoke fluently and casually, with only occasional non-native-like speech and what might be termed mild to moderate foreign accents. Moreover, they were at ease with colloquial New Zealand English, with expressions like *the journey that I have travelled in New Zealand, it's horses for courses, ... from day dot, they want to make it big in this new country*. But they were also at ease with the abstract language of business and professional communities, such as *the drive to succeed, the self-realisation, dealing with customers on a daily basis, their knowledge base, results driven*. In other words, they were not just acceptable speakers, they had adapted and accommodated their language style to their professional contexts, marking them as members of their professional community (Gee, 1991).

These two immigrant managers' views about conforming and socialising appeared to confirm and amplify the views of the other managers who spoke of social interaction in the workplace. Furthermore, they could be seen to illustrate the rewards of accommodation and conformity to the New Zealand culture. What they may also illustrate, however, is Spoonley's (2003) observation that government, and others, consider it solely the immigrant's responsibility to adjust to the New Zealand culture, perhaps reflecting a resistance seen in the wider society to the presences of immigrants.

EAL EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVES

Employment, Capability and Confidence

In parallel to employers' discussions of their recruitment and hiring practices, the EAL immigrant professionals talked briefly about their experiences of searching for work. Many employees told poignant stories of lengthy job searches and depressingly numerous rejections. Many had worked as unskilled labourers before finally obtaining their current position; many had retrained or upskilled in New Zealand. Such stories are familiar in the settlement literature; Firkin et. al. (2004) is one example, among others. Some attributed their job success to tailoring their CVs to particular positions, learned at ARMS job search seminars.

In their view, success came from individual qualities of persistence and ability, but luck and finding an employer willing to give them a chance to prove themselves were also identified as important. To these EAL immigrants, proving yourself largely meant striving to adapt and working hard, in much the same way as the immigrant managers depicted their pathways to fulfilling their career aspirations. The interviewees commented, for example:

I'm quite happy that Peter [pseudonym] gave me this work and I'm proving to him that I'm good.

Initially you have to work very hard.

Most migrants try really hard to adapt to this society, because they have to work harder than locals or people with good English.

Do your best; just try hard, maybe harder than the normal people in your country, because this is a different place.

Like the bank manager who was confident that he would have been "capable" of the executive position he had unsuccessfully applied for, the interviewees characterised themselves as competent and confident, despite early difficulties and the loss of confidence many mentioned. Several explicitly pointed out:

I think I have a very minimal problem with teaching in New Zealand.

I'm OK. I know how it works.

I have very good experience.

Interpreting job is not really difficult.

I had two reviews since I joined and I always get 'excellent'.

In New Zealand things are easier than [back home], because they use the computer.

For the most part, these employees were satisfied and happy with their work and their positions. It is interesting to note that many of them were employed below the level they had in their home country. Their satisfaction may also have arisen from relief at having found work beyond entry level or menial jobs that many described as their initial experience here. Lowered expectations or eagerness to have a settled lifestyle are also possible reasons for job satisfaction despite downward job mobility (Yehudit, 1998).

A number of interviewees spoke of the importance for everyone in their position, whether employed or searching for employment, to keep up their self-confidence and to speak up for themselves. They believed that confidence, as well as hard work, played an important part in their success. One woman, for example, reported on her first days in her current position and her difficulties on the telephone. She had answered a telephone call from an important client, but not knowing who he was, asked for the spelling of his name. Offended, he apparently complained to her manager that her English was not acceptable; she was advised to work on her language skills and was sent to a telephone training course. But, she said, as she met colleagues and clients who responded well to her and as her confidence improved, she spoke more loudly and assertively. She assured me that her English proficiency, which she maintained was already high, was not the issue and did not improve. This event illustrates how increasing experience in the work context and acceptance by co-workers and others enhanced her communication. Had she been a native English speaker, her newness in the workplace would most likely have been considered as an explanation for her telephone behaviour. This is not to blame the employer's assumptions, for he may well have been trying to provide support and guidance. The point is that language proficiency and communicative performance are not the same. Situational factors, especially newness on the job in this case, may be factors in many cases of communicative effectiveness. Miscommunication on the part of EAL immigrants can have a number of sources, including: English language ability; workplace relationships; cultural style; knowledge and experience; and context.

Language Needs

Immigrant interviewees also named specific language areas where they had difficulties: understanding on the telephone, different accents, "talking fast" and local language and idioms. For example:

Most contact is over the phone ... Sometimes I don't catch what people are saying. ... Sometimes people speak fast on the telephone and use slang. Initially it is a little bit difficult but still I'm learning and it will take some time.

My listening was very poor because I was missing local context – it was a lack of local knowledge. ... I was scared of talking to someone on the phone because there was always something which is a name, and that didn't work for me.

Internal communication is okay. Just sometimes there will be clients or customers on the phone or sometimes they talk about a product or system I'm not familiar with the name for.

When I came here ... it just took a while for me to grasp the accent.

Many times especially at the beginning, it was really difficult. Sometimes they say word in their slang and I don't understand.

One employee acknowledged with hindsight that he had earlier overestimated his language competence. He applied for a job in which the second round of interviews was conducted via the telephone. Buoyed by passing to the second round, he was surprised and discouraged to realise that when he received the call, he “couldn't understand what she was asking”. He added:

At that time I thought I will be able to handle it, but it is not easy. It doesn't matter how much you know, you need experience.

Those who had been on the job for more than a few months tended to place their language difficulties in the past, in contrast to the smaller number who had only been working a short time. In the view of the more experienced employees, these language difficulties seemed to clear up with time as they became more accustomed to the language of the workplace. Similarly, an employer told of a group of EAL engineers hired together:

When they first arrived, one-on-one, all the time I [the manager] spent with them was fine and when they went to sit in on a meeting they didn't understand. Once again one-on-one you tend to talk slower and more deliberately ... [One woman] is fine now. She's been here more than a year, but ... she said a lot of it was over her head initially.

When asked how they would advise other immigrants looking for work, they consistently suggested integrating into the New Zealand community as much as possible. However, anecdotal evidence from immigrants suggests that social integration, for example making “Kiwi friends”, is difficult and among the interviewees, only one said he had a single Kiwi friend. Research findings among New Zealand English language students support these comments about the difficulties of establishing social relationships with New Zealanders (Cooke, 2001; White et al, 2002). Cooke's study showed that immigrants pursued several paths to making social contact with New Zealanders, such as joining churches and sports clubs.

Likewise, Norton (2000) reports on a Polish immigrant's struggle to gain access to her English-speaking co-workers in a Canadian fast food outlet. Moreover, for Norton's case study immigrant, access to English interaction was only available in the workplace, and while language classes were helpful, “the most important English teacher for her was ‘real life’” Norton (2004:73), as was noted by several of the EAL employees in the current study. Workplaces with large cohorts of immigrants from a single language group may discourage English language use. For example, one rapidly advancing employee, supervisor of a Vietnamese production line, said:

If we just gather to ourselves, we speak Vietnamese. If I speak English, other people like my friend, he think I show off my English or something like that. ... The next plant supervisor over there is English, so when he come over we talk like English and if we talk to each other we talk Vietnamese.

This employee was referring not only of the need to speak to other employees in Vietnamese but also of pressure not to speak English. In his work situation, speaking more English could have helped improve his language proficiency but at the possible cost of friends and allies among his co-workers and those he supervised. Like the research findings in a Canadian study of a largely Portuguese workplace (Goldstein, 1997), English was the language of management and speaking English meant distancing oneself from one's ethnic group.

Most of the employees claimed they asked for clarification when faced with something they didn't understand. Assertions such as, "*If I don't know I will ask*"; "*There is no way I won't ask and just do*"; "*I always try to find help*" were common. Understanding talk at work was also identified by some employers as a problem area but, ironically, many employers complained that the immigrant employees they knew avoided asking clarification questions. There are several possible reasons for such opposing perceptions. EAL employees may not realise they misunderstand; they may suspect ambiguity will decrease as they engage in the work; they may want to avoid losing face. As well, it may be awkward to ask for clarification of what transpired in an entire meeting. On the other hand, employers may not be explicit or may not give clear instructions.

Some employees told of additional strategies to cope with difficulties understanding others or even being understood:

When I look at their face, sometimes I realise they do not understand what I'm saying ... so I speak slowly and not long sentences.

Another coped with his difficulties on the telephone by asking callers to email him. One emailed an ARMS contact to check his written language.

Overall, immigrants, as experienced language learners (for some English was even a third or fourth language), were more explicit about the nature of their language needs than managers. They found ways to manage their problems on the job, although their strategies may not always have been the most effective for improvement rather than just coping. That is, their strategies may have been effective in managing communication difficulties in a particular situation but they may not have played a part in improving language competence. For example, asking callers to spell their name may not lead to improved comprehension of names. Similarly, for EAL speakers to slow down their speech may not lead to improved pronunciation. Second language acquisition theory differentiates strategies used to overcome communication obstacles from language learning strategies; the two types of strategies appear to benefit each other (Ellis, 1996). According to Skehan (2003), the strategies employed to reduce the language processing load in conversational settings, such as those described above, may distract from attention to language use. It is important to note, however, that the nature of this study, single interviews, precludes assessing the effectiveness of communicative coping strategies over the long term.

The interviews further suggest that many immigrants with adequate results on the international English proficiency tests required by the Immigration Service do have some comprehension and expression difficulties on the job, especially in the early

months of their work experience. The response by some would be to raise the minimum test scores for allowing entry to New Zealand. For example, as one employer put it:

If they're coming in and they got a tertiary degree and they're going to be getting out there in the workplace in an environment like this, it could be a doctor or an engineer or any highly skilled person, they should have a rate of 10.

However, if we consider the nature of language learning and the capabilities of testing, higher minimum scores do not appear to be the answer. First, the testing scheme can only provide a baseline for language proficiency. International language tests do not reflect all the environments of language use; they do not reflect usage in local contexts; and they cannot replicate the same challenging conditions as telephone talk, for example. So it is not surprising that many newly hired EAL immigrants cannot participate fully in meetings or take telephone messages if they have little English experience in those contexts. What is more, international English tests do not use New Zealand accents. Raising the minimum test score for work or residence may not take us far.

Communication and Interaction on the Job

Besides understanding and using correct language, knowing when, how and what to say or write is vitally important in communication. Referred to as “pragmatic” competence in language studies (Yule, 1996), it is the ability to use language appropriately for the social situation. Employers talked about the importance of appropriate communication style, often viewed as culturally based, and its effect on relationships and overall functioning in the workplace. In contrast, immigrant employees, for the most part, seemed much less aware of such issues.

Nevertheless, employees in every field described communicatively demanding interpersonal work situations. An accounts manager referred to not just keeping track of clients' accounts but discussions with them:

You have to sit and have a meeting with them; you have to know what you do with clients, what your requirements are. You have to be able to kind of negotiate with them if there are some differences.

A payroll accountant talked about interacting with other employees:

When employees cash out [their annual leave] they pay higher tax because that is ... on top of their normal salaries or wages, and suddenly they say, “How come I pay so much tax?” I've got to explain that to them why, “Because that is on top of your salary and with the tax brackets, ... you pay a higher rate”.

An interpreter told of the need to handle difficult situations when clients were applying for government or public services. She had, at times, been blamed for not

playing an interventionist role in such encounters, particularly with members of her own native culture:

Sometimes [in a service application] if things are declined, ... they think I'm a decision maker. They think if the issue doesn't work, it's ... because I didn't interpret or I didn't really push the person to approve.

These kinds of situations require sophisticated skills of explanation, justification of points and negotiation with others, all the time maintaining harmonious work relationships. Two employees did recognise pragmatic challenges and spoke of them explicitly.

One talked about his difficulties in meetings:

If I want to talk about someone in a meeting, I can't go around the issue without offending the person. I just can say it directly. They [native English speakers] say different way and they put many stuff around it ... For example the other day I was talking about someone who ... did many mistakes and I corrected her mistakes. She's a specialist and then at the meeting I wanted to say we're grateful to her but she still needs more training. But it was direct and many [people] just directly thought she'll be hurt -- they just said, "We're grateful for you [the EAL employee] that you did; you corrected the mistakes but that doesn't mean she is not good." I said, "I didn't say she's not good," but I stopped talking because I couldn't continue. ... If I would say it in my language, I would say it better.

An accountant told of an experience in a previous position as he was working his way up to his current job, on the same level as his position back home:

The job was quite different from what I've been doing. I was used to working at a level where I get the complete picture of what is happening in the total organisation. ... When I came it was a very compartmentalised and very small job, so I started asking questions, obviously from my past experience. ... My bosses did not have answers, and that's where sort of an uneasiness crept in. I sensed that my supervisor was not comfortable with those type of questions. Then I stopped asking.

These two examples illustrate the challenges that appropriate language use presents to EAL speakers. The first seemed to believe that his limited language created an obstacle to speaking in a socially appropriate manner. The second example shows how language use (questioning) is intertwined with the employee's background knowledge and his growing understanding of the supervisor's attitudes. Judgements like the one the accountant made can be challenging even for native speakers operating in their own culture. Yet many of the EAL employees interviewed in this study seemed unaware of the role that socially appropriate language use plays in communication and social relationships. Likewise, Riddiford and Joe (2006:105) found that EAL students in a Wellington workplace English language programme "did not identify pragmatics to be a problem for them and only later became aware of the importance of this aspect".

In general, these immigrant employees were confident of their ability to perform their jobs. They believed that their language abilities improved with interaction and experience on the job. While resourceful about overcoming communication breakdowns, they had not developed strategies for improving the language development. They were aware of comprehension difficulties in tasks involving interpersonal communication but they were less aware of the complexity and need for appropriateness in accomplishing these tasks well.

Like the employer interviewees, and unlike research findings on immigrants who had not found work in their field (e.g. Firkin et al, 2004), immigrant employees seemed to accept full responsibility for integrating into New Zealand life. That is, they were not critical of New Zealand society, the government or employers. They spoke of working hard, “mixing” with New Zealanders and adjusting to life here. On one hand, they may have been identifying with and internalising a predominant view in New Zealand that it is the newcomers who must adjust to the host culture. On the other hand, they may have tacitly realised from their prior experience with settlement and job searches that there is not a great deal of support for immigrants, even with the recent establishment of settlement services like ARMS and professional groups such as the Special Interest Group for Immigrant Engineers (SIGIE), part of the Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand (IPENZ).

SUMMARY

Interviews of employers of EAL immigrant professionals and tertiary-educated EAL employees offer a focus on language and communication experiences in the workplace. Interviewees thus have the additional benefit of reflection and hindsight and the open-ended interview format allowed them to construct their own perspectives. While the study size and interpretive approach mean that the research findings are not generalisable, they present insights into issues that have been identified but not widely analysed.

Hiring and recruitment of EAL immigrants into professional positions seem to call for balancing a set of factors. The first is risk of the unknown, for EAL immigrants constitute many unknowns to employers, including language and qualifications. In interview situations, as well as in workplace encounters, EAL immigrants may not have full control of communication styles that employers interpret as signals of desirable employment characteristics. Other factors are need due to skills shortages, now a well-documented problem in New Zealand, and investment required to train new employees. Large businesses appear to have flexibility in hiring immigrants at entry level positions, after which they observe employees at work with a view to promotion. Other large businesses have the funds and resources (e.g., Human Resource Departments) to develop multi-faceted screening procedures. They may also have the resources to support new employees in the first few months of orientation. In light of this study, language and communication styles emerge as unknown factors that may add to the burden of considerations for employers. Given that New Zealand only relatively recently began to accept large numbers of non-European immigrants, it may not be surprising that employers with little experience in hiring EAL immigrants (i.e., those not interviewed in this study), particularly those in small businesses, would be reluctant to hire EAL newcomers.

Language as communicative competence was a perspective largely shared by both employers and employees in this study. While it was not clear from employers' comments (with one exception) or employees' reports what level of correct language use was important in these workplaces, these views have implications for the question of language preparedness. The current system of pre-immigration testing to determine the level of language readiness for the workplace does not adequately reflect the breadth and depth of communicative needs in particular workplace contexts. For example, engineers who need to communicate with construction site workers, as well as clients on the telephone and colleagues in meetings need a range of English language competencies well beyond test taking skills. Nevertheless, it might be expected that highly-qualified, experienced EAL immigrants would feel confident that once they pass the language test requirements, their English would be adequate to perform their work.

One drawback for both employers and employees is that communicative language development takes time. If newly-hired employees need to work immediately with customers and clients, employers may be disappointed in their communication skills. Likewise, if employees are in a workplace with little regular interpersonal contact, including informal contact where they can talk without job performance stress, their language development is disadvantaged. Furthermore, immigrant employees need

explicit, supportive feedback about how effectively and appropriately they communicate.

There were opposing perceptions about employees' readiness to ask for clarification in situations where comprehension was a problem. Whereas employers found it a problem, EAL employees asserted that they consistently used questioning strategies. Whether the contrasting views arise from culture, lack of knowledge, just being new to a workplace, or a combination of factors, a more open informative approach to what is valued in the New Zealand workplace might address this discrepancy. For example, the importance of asking questions and checking understanding can be emphasised, discussed and compared across cultures in language and work orientation programmes. But employers can also adopt non-threatening strategies for checking comprehension, as well as giving feedback. Moreover, it is important to remember that miscommunication is a function of various situations and does not always arise from problems of English language ability.

Another difference between employers' and EAL employees' perceptions concerns *work responsibilities and roles*. Immigrants were confident in their ability to do their job well, and for the most part, saw themselves as competent or developing communicators in terms of accomplishing their work effectively. They tended to see their job as particular tasks and responsibilities for which they were well-qualified and experienced. Employers, on the other hand, considered interaction at work to be essential to smooth functioning of the workplace and to the establishment and maintenance of workplace relationships. They faulted EAL employees' general lack of engagement in workplace interaction. Employers also reported that EAL employees did not take the initiative or offer their opinions when asked. They attributed both of these problems to cultural differences. They suggested, for example, that workplaces in other cultures were much more hierarchical than in New Zealand and that newcomers were thus reticent to speak out. Such differences in employee behaviour, however, may as easily arise from situational conditions in the workplace. Education and orientation programmes could address these differences in employer and employee perspectives.

This project has taken a step in investigating issues of language and communication in the workplace. The findings can be assessed against others' knowledge and experience of employers and EAL immigrant professionals. They can contribute to moving forward measures to help EAL immigrants fulfil their professional potential and their participation in New Zealand life and work. The ultimate test is whether there is lasting benefit both to the immigrants and to New Zealand society.

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