

THE THREE P'S OF ESL IN THE WORKPLACE

Proficiency, pronunciation, & pragmatics

By Tracey M. Derwing, University of Alberta; Simon Fraser University

Abstract

Findings from two English in the Workplace research projects are outlined; the first is a study carried out at two firms that hired a substantial number of immigrant professionals, primarily engineers. The L2 participants' communicative skills in English were found to be affected by proficiency, pronunciation, and pragmatics. Interviews were conducted with L2 immigrant employees, and Human Resources representatives, and a questionnaire was completed by L1 English employees, who shared their views of working with their L2 counterparts, especially regarding oral communication. The second study focused on the instruction of pronunciation and pragmatics for long-term employees in a factory, who, after several promotions, had greater need for more comprehensible speech. Both perception and production tests were utilized pre- and post-instruction, and a model for giving feedback to employees was developed. Some of the challenges and successes of workplace programs are outlined and recommendations are offered for future research.

Government-funded adult language programs in Canada are designed to prepare newcomers for integration and for entry into the workplace. Indeed, over the last several years, immigration policy has placed an increasing emphasis on employment issues, largely because, as Picot and Sweetman (2012) indicated, skills in Canada's official languages "have significant direct and indirect influences on labour market success and are key to positive outcomes" (p. 8). Some provinces also provide monies for adult language training; in the case of Alberta, the overwhelming majority of provincially-funded language training programs are geared to helping immigrants gain access to the workplace. Although many newcomers are under-employed in jobs that do not fully utilize their education or qualifications (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000), opportunities for professional immigrants to re-enter their original occupations exist when the economy is good. The first study reported here involved two companies that experienced rapid growth during a strong economic period, and an immediate need for more engineers; both companies hired large numbers of immigrants. The immigrant employees had the technical skills for their jobs, but their communication skills, particularly for interactions in a team environment, were a cause

for concern. The study describes an intervention to promote better communication within the companies. The second study recounted here is that of a pedagogical intervention for long-term immigrants who had been promoted repeatedly. Each job promotion required more nuanced communication skills, and for the individuals who participated in the study, both pronunciation and pragmatic issues were causing problems with their performance at work.

The Three P's of Communication

Overall proficiency in a second language (L2), as measured by such tests as the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment Tool, TOEFL, IELTS, and others, is a major determinant of an immigrant's employment. Many companies and institutions require a baseline level of proficiency as a hiring requirement. However, proficiency levels as measured by standardized tests do not necessarily reflect two aspects of language that affect communicative success. Both pronunciation and pragmatics influence an individual's efficacy in transmitting meaning, and yet often receive short shrift in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms (Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Pronunciation errors may interfere with a listener's comprehension of the intended message, affecting intelligibility (actual understanding) and comprehensibility (ease of understanding; Derwing & Munro, 2015). Pragmatics, or the culturally acceptable ways of using language (e.g., speech acts such as appropriate ways of asking a favour, giving feedback, disagreeing, or teasing someone), may affect an interlocutor's reaction to a speaker. Because pragmatic conventions are culturally determined, they vary from one language to the next. As Yates (2004) noted in arguing for the teaching of pragmatics in ESL classrooms, native speakers can generally recognize pronunciation problems as a language learning difficulty, but they often interpret inappropriate use of pragmatics as rude behaviour rather than as a gap in language learning. In fact, Laroche and Rutherford (2007) cite dozens of anecdotes from foreign-born professionals in the Canadian workplace that support Yates' assertion. Although most adult L2 programs in Canada aim to increase learners' overall proficiency by focusing on the four skills and grammar, pronunciation and pragmatics are often missing from the curriculum (Derwing & Munro 2015; Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2010) carried out a study of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in which they compared students in LINC with matched individuals who had been tested, but who had not registered for LINC instruction. Although the instructed students showed significant gains over the non-instructed group in reading and writing, there were no significant differences between the two groups in their listening and speaking skills.

One consequence of a heavier focus on reading, writing and grammar in LINC and ESL classes is the fact that immigrants often perform well on written tasks, and can demonstrate sufficient proficiency to be hired into a job, but may not have the pronunciation or pragmatic skills to keep that job.

Study One: Immigrant Engineers in the Workplace

Representatives from the Human Resources (HR) departments in two companies contacted a local provider of ESL for assistance with some of their L2 immigrant employees. The employees in question had strong engineering skills, but were not communicating well on the job. As one of the HR representatives indicated, they had received considerable feedback from Canadian-born employees that they had difficulty understanding the L2 engineers. The local ESL provider contacted the author to suggest that the interventions designed by their instructors would make an interesting workplace research study.

Research Question

The primary research question was whether the interventions, which focused primarily on pronunciation and pragmatics, would result in improved communications in the workplace, as perceived by the learners themselves, their co-workers, and company management.

Method

The study entailed open-ended interviews with two HR staff, the lead ESL/Culture instructor, and 15 L2 employees, from Bangladesh, Columbia, China, India, Pakistan, Philippines and Venezuela. In addition, twenty-four native speaker (NS) employees completed a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards their L2 counterparts. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the responses to the questionnaires were collated.

Results

Courses Offered. The interviews with the HR staff and the instructor indicated that the job requirements for the L2 employees included strong oral skills for interactions in project teams. The team approach to projects conducted in the companies meant that all team members were expected to contribute ideas in meetings, offer constructive feedback, and speak clearly. However, there were several ongoing complaints that the immigrant engineers were often silent in meetings, and that when they did talk, they were difficult to understand. The lead instructor indicated that his first step was to job shadow several employees in a variety of settings to gain a sense of the range of communication requirements. He then developed a three-part course for the L2 employees from both companies, offered for three hours every Friday afternoon over 12 weeks. The companies paid for the course development and instruction, and the employees gave their own time for the lessons (all staff in both firms worked long hours during the week in order to have Friday afternoons off).

The course began with a pronunciation component, focusing on aspects of the speakers' accents that caused problems for intelligibility. The second component comprised pragmatic instruction. For example, employees were taught how to discuss contentious matters in a diplomatic way, such as disagreeing with another team member using expressions like 'I

take your point, but ... ’ The instructor gave numerous examples of appropriate ways to challenge another individual’s statements, ways to interrupt successfully, and generally how to back-channel in a format that Canadian-born employees would understand. The third component of the course was labelled ‘autonomous language learning.’ The employees were asked to read the local paper, particularly editorials and regular columns, and were encouraged to bring questions to class about anything they didn’t understand. The instructor’s goal was to get the participants to consider how a second language offers broader insights on the world, while at the same time familiarizing them with local issues, giving them ‘small talk’ topics to discuss with their colleagues.

In conjunction with others, the instructor also developed a series of four intercultural training workshops for management and HR staff to help them recognize the socio-cultural challenges faced by the immigrant employees. The workshops dealt with how to interpret a résumé from another country, general aspects of cross-cultural communications, and cross-cultural conflict. Management and HR staff were also encouraged to discuss how to develop immigrant employees’ leadership skills to take on project management positions. Role play was a major component of the course; for instance, the instructor brought in three high proficiency L2 speakers from a local language provider who were engineers. These individuals took on the role of employers in job interviews while the managers of the company played job applicants. The managers generally did not fare well, because they failed to follow the standard procedures found in the countries of origin of the L2 speakers. The instructor guided the discussion after the role plays, helping the managers and HR individuals to interpret what had happened.

Immigrant Employees’ Perceptions. The immigrant employees were asked whether they had taken LINC and/or ESL classes in Canada, and if so, whether they had found them helpful. Seven of the 15 had studied English in Canada. All seven indicated that although they learned in their programs, they would have benefitted more from a greater emphasis on speaking and listening. Two representative comments illustrate this point very well: “[The course was] a little bit helpful – the program has a different aim. My aim is to look for a job, to be familiar with the Canadian working place. Aim at [X] College is to upgrade [prepare for university].” “More emphasis should have been on conversation than on grammar.” When the immigrant employees were questioned about the helpfulness of the three-part workplace course they had just completed, the majority indicated that it was very useful, but some felt that the course was too short. The following comments are representative of the whole group’s reaction: “Oh, yeah, [it helped] a lot - I was introduced to the Canadian workplace culture.” “Yeah, sure, it helped, but it was too short. The culture aspect was the most helpful.” “Ah, yes, definitely ... I think this course could help me in the future.” “The focus on speaking and communication was most helpful.” The employees were also asked whether they were happy in their jobs. Fourteen of the 15 respondents indicated that they were, as these comments suggest: “Ah yes...just sometimes maybe I have a little bit of difficulty, I mean for this language... but it’s getting better.” “I’m getting cooperation. People are friendly ... acceptance value is more. And the main thing is management is

aware of immigrant limitations, so it's easy to move ahead.” Although happy in their jobs, only two of the 15 immigrant employees reported having close Canadian-born friends, and most indicated that they did not socialize with their co-workers (for example, most said they ate lunch alone at their desks).

NS Employee Questionnaire. A questionnaire was completed by 24 employees who worked with the immigrant engineers on a daily basis. The questions dealt primarily with communication patterns in the company, and the NSs’ perceptions of their L2 counterparts’ use of English. Five of the questions and the responses to them can be seen in Table 1. The respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their responses by adding comments to each question.

Table 1. Canadian-Born Employee Perceptions of Communicating with Immigrant Employees.

	QUESTION	YES	NO	N/A
1.	Is more effort required to communicate with ESL speakers than NSs?	22	1	1
2.	Do you have difficulty communicating with ESL speakers?	22	2	
3.	Do the ESL speakers have problems communicating?	24		
4.	Do most employees socialize within their L1 groups?	23	1	
5.	Are NSs reluctant to talk with ESL speakers?	16	3	5

The majority of respondents indicated that it takes more effort to talk with the immigrant employees than with other native speakers. One individual put it this way: “[It’s] both harder to understand AND harder to be understood. The analogies that I tend to use are not easily translated. The time delay required for them to translate what I say, think in their native language, then translate to English and share it is painful for a person with little patience to spare. Humour is completely lost a lot of the time.” In Question 2, we asked whether the NSs had experienced difficulty communicating with L2 speakers at work, and again, the response was unequivocal. As one of the respondents commented, “Yes, sometimes their accent is too dominant. I seriously can’t understand them sometimes. Sometimes I feel they don’t have a strong enough vocabulary, which results in their explanations of things to be somewhat unclear.” Question 3 asked whether some ESL speakers in the company generally have difficulty communicating effectively with other employees in the workplace – all agreed that that was the case. In Question 4 the NSs were asked whether people in their company tended to socialize more within their own L1 groups. Most agreed that they did; note that this includes English speakers. Finally in question 5, NSs were asked if they are sometimes reluctant to initiate conversations with ESL employees; two thirds agreed that they were. This last question is particularly relevant, given the responses to our next query: How should your L2 co-workers improve their English? Overwhelmingly, the NSs recommended that the immigrant engineers practice speaking English, although some suggested that this practice should be with other speakers of the immigrants’ native language, or at home with family members. Some respondents advised that the L2

engineers should focus on pronunciation, while another mentioned learning more about the culture and norms of communication. A couple of people indicated that the engineers should give up their first language altogether, although they acknowledged that it was a fairly unrealistic expectation.

In sum, the participants in the pronunciation/pragmatics component of the study and the managerial and HR staff felt on the whole, that the instruction had been beneficial and that the L2 speakers had gained valuable communication skills. However, the co-workers who did not receive pragmatics training did not perceive an improvement and continued to be frustrated by and unhelpful towards their L2 counterparts.

Study Two: Pronunciation Instruction for L2 Speakers in a Workplace Setting

A full description of this study has been published elsewhere (Derwing, Munro, Foote, Waugh & Fleming, 2014). For this reason, I will provide only a brief summary of the findings here.

I was contacted by the in-house ESL instructor at a local factory. Seven long-term employees, six Vietnamese speakers, and one Khmer speaker self-identified as having pronunciation difficulties that interfered with their work. They had been in Canada for an average of 19 years. In every case, the employees had been promoted several times because of their excellent work ethic and knowledge of the factory operations, but with each promotion came the need for stronger communication skills. I was asked to participate in the development of a pronunciation course and to document the outcomes; a representative from a local college was also asked to develop pragmatics workshops for the same factory employees.

Research Question

The primary research question was whether the L2 speakers' communication, both in terms of pronunciation and pragmatics, could be improved in a short time, even though they had been living and working in an English-speaking environment for many years.

Method

After conducting an extensive needs analysis, the instructor for the pronunciation course and I developed perception and production tests that were administered both before and after the 17-hour course. The course itself was offered three times a week for 30 minutes at a time. In addition, the participants were asked to do a minimum of 10 minutes of listening and speaking homework five days a week. They all agreed to do so, and some of them spent considerably more time practicing on their own. The activities in class focused on raising the participants' awareness of their pronunciation problems, and improving perception and production using techniques such as dictation, shadowing, and explicit correction. Homework was provided for each class on a mini-recorder; learners had both listening and

speaking tasks to perform. These tasks were also available on a wiki, so that the students could revisit all homework activities at any time.

Results

A comparison of the pre- and post-tests revealed that the participants' own perception, measured through dictations, improved significantly. Listening experiments were designed in which the intelligibility and comprehensibility of the participants' productions were assessed by 30 NS listeners. Both speech dimensions improved significantly as a result of the course.

The pragmatics component of the training was provided by a local college. Based on input from the factory managers and the participants themselves, it was determined that the participants needed help with giving feedback to the workers for whom they were responsible. The instructor gave workshops totalling five hours on this topic to the L2 employees alone, a two-hour session with managers to discuss intercultural communication, and another two-hour session with management and employees in the course. Together they developed a model with exemplars for giving feedback under the acronym ABLE: Acknowledge, Behaviour, Learning, and Expectations. This model provided the participants with an approach to give feedback to workers in a respectful way, but with clarity about expectations for changed behaviour.

Discussion and Recommendations

In both studies, management recognized that there were communication problems that could not be addressed in-house. In the case of the first firm, there was a general unease with the oral communication skills of some of the L2 employees, which was attributed to accent, although when a needs analysis was carried out, both pronunciation and pragmatics were at issue, along with proficiency in a few instances. Writing skills were also a concern, and prior to the course described here, the company had sent some foreign-born engineers to a local college for a writing course. That course was determined to have minimal benefits, since it was not tailored to the writing needs of the engineers. Management came to recognize that if their employees were to be helped, it would have to be with a program that addressed specific problems, rather than generic, one-size-fits-all courses. In the case of the second company, an expert ESL instructor was already on staff; he very readily identified some of the issues faced by L2 employees, but, given his extensive responsibilities on site, he recognized that he could not spare the time to work on these issues with the employees in question. The management in that company also recognized the nature of the problem, and encouraged the ESL instructor to approach external experts to provide assistance in the workplace. It was abundantly clear that the employees would not simply "pick up" the language they needed on the job. In both studies, needs analyses (including job shadowing) indicated that pronunciation and pragmatics were the areas that would most benefit the immigrant employees, although general proficiency in English was also an issue for some. Pragmatics and pronunciation instruction for L2 employees, tailored to the

communication needs of the workplace, was successful in both studies, thus answering the primary research questions for each study. It is clear that significant improvements in L2 speakers' productions can take place within a limited time period; not only that, Study Two indicates that it is never too late to enhance an L2 speaker's comprehensibility.

In Study One, the Canadian-born NSs in management and HR positions gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant employees as a result of the pragmatics workshops offered to them. They also recognized improvement in the communication skills of those employees who received instruction, perhaps because they now understood and knew what to look for. Unfortunately, many of the employees who worked most closely in teams with the immigrant engineers did not receive the pragmatics training. As one of the L2 engineers suggested, it would be useful in future to have joint sessions with immigrants and Canadian-born alike, so that they could learn together what the "secret rules of language" are. The importance of working with both Canadian-born and foreign-born employees together on pragmatics cannot be underestimated. In Study One, the HR and Management who received some pragmatics training had far more empathy and patience for their L2 staff, whereas the Canadian-born co-workers, who did not receive instruction, continued to express frustration with their L2 counterparts. Pragmatics training in a cross-cultural context has benefits not just for the workplace, but for society in general. The more individuals can be accepting of differences, and the more they make an effort to understand people from another culture, the better.

In Study Two, there was an integrated session for both L2 speakers and the senior management. Doing these cultural exercises together after some preparation with the L2 speakers alone was extremely valuable. Although the L2 participants in this study were already highly valued for their work ethic and technical skills, some of the management team expressed surprise at the initiative that the instructed workers displayed after the course. For example, at a final class ceremony, one of the participants offered an impromptu speech, thanking the instructors and the company for providing the course. The plant manager indicated that "he [the L2 employee] would never have done that three months ago." The manager went on to say that he had noticed a real improvement in emails (not a focus of instruction) as a result of both the pronunciation and pragmatics instruction because the employees were now using final consonants, where they often left them off before, and the structure of the emails was far more to the point.

Most of the L2 participants in both studies would have liked longer courses. The participants made significant progress, but felt that they could have learned more had there been more time. The greatest challenge faced by English in the Workplace programs is that everyone is busy and often companies have very little time to set aside for these types of initiatives. Moreover, there is a lingering perception on the part of some employers that a single course should suffice. Another challenge to English in the Workplace courses is the cost. The companies involved in these studies were large and had budgets that could accommodate a range of training opportunities. This is not the case with many smaller

businesses, who might require some government assistance if they were to offer English in the Workplace support to their employees. Companies may want to consider a cooperative approach, in which several firms combine resources to offer their L2 employees support for pronunciation and pragmatics. Finally, the companies involved in these studies were well aware that their employees had valuable technical skills and were worth the investment. Organizations such as ERIEC, the Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council (similar to TRIEC in Toronto), have reached out to such employers to have them speak to others about the benefits of hiring immigrants who may need some initial support, but ultimately, whether or not a company chooses to invest in the communication skills of their L2 staff depends on many factors, including the robustness of the economy.

Although employers are typically responsible for improved communication skills in the workplace, LINC and ESL programs should provide increased foundational support. First, LINC/ESL programs should examine whether they are addressing adult immigrants' actual communication needs beyond the traditional four skills and grammar. Pronunciation, speaking skills to enhance fluency and cultural training to improve awareness of pragmatic conventions appear to be what the NSs and L2 speakers in these studies have identified as most important for the workplace. These are precisely the areas that do not appear to be given as much coverage in many LINC and ESL classrooms as other language skills.

LINC teachers may feel pressured by the curriculum in their programs to spend more time on grammar, writing, and vocabulary learning than on oral proficiency skills. Furthermore, it is often difficult to design speaking activities that engage the whole class, especially when class sizes are large. Instructors may wish to suggest planning meetings with the program administrator, in which everyone involved works towards a curriculum with a greater emphasis on oral communication. A close examination of the student population may indicate that a stand-alone pronunciation option would be useful for some students.

A recommendation for LINC funders is that they require programs to have TESL trained teachers. Some LINC providers in Canada still rely on instructors who have no TESL training but who have been "grandfathered" in (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Furthermore, funders should be asking questions about time spent on speaking and listening. It is evident from the federal government's own research (CIC, 2010) that more focus should be placed on the development of oral communication skills.

It is recommended that TESL programs in Canada review their offerings. Few provide courses in teaching pronunciation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011), and a quick review of Canadian university websites suggests that there are very few stand-alone courses in how to teach pragmatics. No doubt both of these topics arise in methodology classes, but their importance is minimized if they are not given the coverage they deserve. Furthermore, instructors are unlikely to get good guidance from general skills textbooks on pragmatic content, which Diepenbroek and Derwing (2013) found in a survey of texts to be insufficient in many respects.

Given that many immigrants arrive in Canada with some English already or are NSs of another variety of English (for instance, eight of the engineers in Study One had learned English in their home countries), workplace programs that focus on sociocultural aspects of language in the local context for both NS and immigrant employees, regardless of their first language, can offer useful insights for improved communication among all workers.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to communication in the workplace. Janet Holmes and her team in New Zealand (Holmes & Riddiford, 2009) have made a great start by documenting real language use in the workplace. Dahm and Yates (2014) have shown the necessity for conducting workplace research with language that is “as close to naturally occurring data as possible” (p. 28). Their research on International Medical Graduates’ speech patterns compared to Australian patterns clearly shows that the approaches to establishing rapport in the workplace are culturally determined. More research along these lines is needed. Finally, it is important to know more about how willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007) on the part of both NSs and L2 speakers in the workplace can be enhanced, so that more Canadian-born co-workers will share the reaction of one of the participants in Study One to their immigrant peers: “The more I try [to talk with them], the easier it is. Wish others would see that too.”

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