

## An Examination of Workplace Discourse in Considering Teaching Authentic Materials

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# **“An Examination of Workplace Discourse in Considering Teaching Authentic Materials”**

John-Russell Anscomb-Iino

## **Abstract ~**

This paper re-examines the importance and employability of ‘authentic’ classroom materials as advocated by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) by considering the suitability of utilizing Discourse Analysis research data as those ‘authentic materials’. This is done by: analysing a specific example from the workplace transcript data of the Wellington (New Zealand) Language in the Workplace Project (WLWP), evaluating the general, theoretical findings of its director Dr. Janet Holmes, and considering existing classroom and textbook utilization of authentic texts from this Discourse Analysis project. This paper then considers the potential opportunities and possible problems presented by using these authentic materials in particular as well as authentic materials in general to better prepare students both in the ESL classrooms of New Zealand and in the EFL classrooms of Japan and the rest of Asia for effective participation in ‘real world’ English-language workplaces and other settings.

**Keywords:** authentic language, authentic (classroom) materials, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Discourse Analysis, L2 textbooks, negative ‘face’, positive ‘face’, relational goals, transactional goals, workplace discourse

## **General Introduction ~**

At present, most native speaker teachers of English can automatically attain some professional credibility by claiming to align themselves, at least to some degree, with the Communicative Approach, or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This is possible because CLT is more of a general ‘approach’ to teaching than a regimented teaching method. One of the major principles of CLT is said to be that “authentic and meaningful communication should be the

goal of classroom activities” (Richards and Schmidt, page 90). Despite this principle’s very apparent vagueness, it has been consistently coupled - in David Nunan’s five features of CLT (1991) and other, less famous, descriptions of CLT - with a very clear expectation that, in order to achieve these ends, *‘authentic’* written and oral ‘textbook’ materials must be used. This is an obvious response to the linguistic and situational artificiality of traditional L2 textbooks whose materials had been created, organized, and presented for the convenience of teachers attempting to systematically teach isolated grammar points, rather than for the real-world needs of students. Nevertheless, the question still remains as to exactly what oral and written content can be regarded both as authentic, native speaker, ‘real world’ materials and as useful and appropriate content for the L2 classroom. This paper examines the theoretical and practical results of a study of specialized ‘workplace discourse’ (a developing field of Discourse Analysis) in order to evaluate the utility and practicality of employing such realistic, every-day, real world L1 discourse in order to effectively facilitate appropriate L2 acquisition.

Precursors to CLT that led the initial efforts to replace standard Grammatical/Structural Syllabi with some form of ‘communicative’ syllabus, included the Notional-Functional Syllabus and the Situational Syllabus. The more recent Task-based Syllabus has taken a similar approach while actually operating within the broad CLT framework. Although these approaches do address certain aspects of socio-linguistic and socio-cultural competence by providing students with opportunities to acquire basic speech acts as well as some understanding of appropriate forms of address and role relationships, they seem to lack the potential to encompass both a hierarchical, development of these specialized skills and the parallel development of other language skills that do not fit naturally into the categories of notions, functions and tasks.

More recently, L2 pedagogy has also begun to utilize the findings of some of the quantitative frameworks for the empirical examination of authentic language. One obvious example is the attempted removal of vocabulary from under the traditional umbrella of “grammatical competence” in the belief that words, rather than grammar, are the real basis of communication. Research on the development of a Lexical Approach in which frequency of authentic lexical

use should dictate the order of vocabulary presentation has been supported by the computerized accessibility of the COBUILD Bank of English Corpus and more recent lexical corpora, the Vocabulary-Frequency Studies headed by Dr. Paul Nation, and the Collocation Studies of Dr. Tom Cobb. Nevertheless, there still remains the problem of packaging such content so that it is suitable for both classroom presentation and a progressive syllabus in the communicative classroom.

Generally speaking, L2 pedagogy has been even far more hesitant to consider the findings of the diverse, but overlapping, qualitative approaches to the empirical study of naturally-occurring language use found in: Conversation Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Discursive Psychology, Critical Linguistics, and Politeness Theory as well as other social science studies of language. However, one way to arrive at CLT's objective of authentic and meaningful communication could, perhaps, be the pedagogical adaptation of some of the findings of Discourse Analysis Studies as these are generally concerned with naturally-occurring language use beyond the sentence boundary in coherent sentence sequences, propositions, speech acts, and turns-at-talk.

In considering the applicability of these qualitative social science findings to the L2 language classroom, a good starting point might be the work of the Wellington (New Zealand) Language in the Workplace Project (WLWP), under the directorship of Dr. Janet Holmes. This is because the results from this study of authentic language within a particular speech community are currently utilized in some specialized New Zealand L2 classrooms. This on-going research has employed 'triangulation' by gathering data through observations, recordings, and interviews, resulting in a database of over 3000 communicative interactions involving approximately 500 participants in at least 33 New Zealand workplaces (Holmes, 2011 lecture). Next, Dr. Holmes has employed an eclectic set of approaches, including Politeness Theory, Social Identity and Intergroup Theory, Community of Practice, Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, and Social Constructionism (gender studies and management style studies) in a Socio-Linguistic analysis of the transcripts of these interactions. The generalized findings and authentic texts from this analysis of workplace interaction have already been

employed in both a classroom programme and a textbook for intermediate and advanced (IELTS 6.5 minimum) non-native speakers of English entering New Zealand's skilled or professional workforces. The TESL curriculum of the Victoria University of Wellington's "Workplace Communication Skills" Programme focuses on language skills that would be most useful in the socio-cultural environments of each student's specific workplace, while the complementary 'business English' textbook, *Workplace Talk in Action*, by Nicky Riddiford and Jonathan Newton purports to have more general application. Both attempt to employ examples of authentic texts from the collected workplace data to provide the appropriate transactional and interactional dimensions of the socio-pragmatic skills involved in the functional communicative strategies employed within the New Zealand business community.

To evaluate the potential L2 pedagogical opportunity presented by social science studies of language such as the WLWP, this paper first conducts an analysis of a partial transcript from this Workshop Project by employing standard WLWP criteria and terminology to evaluate the interactional goals involved in the transactions. The examination of the two workplace transactional goals evident in this transcript employs: Critical Discourse Analysis in considering the power (and dominance) relationships and the employment of that power in the transactional aspects of these ordinary workplace negotiations; Politeness/Rapport (Management) Theory in considering its relational aspects; and, the findings of Gender Studies in the examination of both of these aspects. Then, the results from this paper's analysis of the partial transcript and from Dr. Holmes' general analysis of all the WLWP transcript data are evaluated to determine the probable utility of such authentic texts with particular reference to Japanese and other Asian TEFL classrooms.

### **Workplace Transcript: Situational Background ~**

Although the partial workplace transcript examined here is technically a dialogue, this might equally be regarded as the transcript of a monologue from Ruth to a 'captive audience' of one because Nell makes only one, monosyllabic utterance. This severely curtails any opportunity for a discussion of the Conversation Analysis fundamentals of 'feedback' and 'turn-taking'.

It would appear that Ruth and Nell are white-collar employees at a non-governmental organization (NGO) providing policy advice and limited grants to group and individual applicants. Although Ruth is clearly Nell's immediate supervisor, Nell should also be above the clerical level as she has the authority to make administrative decisions about grant applications, which are then reviewed by Ruth. The fact that they are both women adds an interesting gender twist to any analysis of management style and power manipulation.

In this particular case, Nell has prepared a rejection letter for a grant application, and Ruth is now faced with the unenviable task of suggesting that there are problems with the approach that Nell has taken in explaining that rejection to the applicants. It is possible that Nell might have been called into Ruth's office out of concern for privacy issues and Nell's loss of face. Nevertheless, assuming that Nell's work area is sufficiently private, Ruth's general style suggests that she would have avoided such a confrontational approach and would, instead, have gone to Nell herself in an effort to keep the situation as informal and non-adversarial as possible.

The transcript covers a part of an informal meeting that does not extend beyond a discussion of a grant rejection. The fact that the pronoun "It('s)" starts line 1 and clearly refers to the problem letter indicates that the discussion of the first transactional issue is already in progress. The apparent omission of both the beginning and the end of even the business portion of this informal meeting may be responsible for providing a distorted picture of Nell's contribution to the conversation as being so extremely limited. Because the conversation is not provided in its entirety, we also have no idea what, if any, preliminary relational strategies Ruth employs in the way of small talk before getting down to a business discussion, although, again, Ruth's general style suggests that she might well have avoided the unpleasant task as long as possible.

What is most interesting, however, is that the focus of the meeting unexpectedly and completely shifts from this first, one-sided negotiation of the original 'correction transaction' to a second, one-sided suggestion for an 'alternate transaction'. Ruth has been totally focused on her evaluation of the grant rejection letter and, perhaps, on her preparations of the best strategies to gain Nell's constructive cooperation in revising her approach to that letter. As a result, it is

only while Ruth is actually talking to Nell that she realizes that there might possibly be an alternative to rejecting the grant application and sending the rejection letter.

Ruth has almost certainly had the opportunity to spend as much time as she felt she needed to prepare an advance strategy for dealing with the first, rather straightforward transaction. By contrast, she has had absolutely no time to prepare for the spontaneous, second transaction, which should have been far more complicated. Nevertheless, Ruth's talk in the first transaction is so hopelessly confused and garbled that a road map is needed [and provided shortly as {C} Edited Transcript] to help a reader find his way through it. By comparison, Ruth engages in the second transaction in a much clearer and more logical manner, perhaps because it is positive and non-confrontational. This discrepancy between the two transactions suggests that awkwardness in dealing with the negative aspects of the first transaction is the result of either a genuine lack of confidence on Ruth's part in negotiating such a stressful matter or a conscious set of transactional and relational techniques intentionally manipulated by Ruth to overcome any resistance from Nell.

As the first part of this passage has been selected for the textbook *Workplace Talk in Action* (Riddiford and Newton, page 91) as an example of transactional and relational goals, it can be assumed that the WLWP considered Nell's discourse to be an excellent example of standard socio-pragmatic manipulative techniques consciously or unconsciously employed by women managers. Nevertheless, this apparent seal of approval still cannot remove this writer's suspicion that Ruth is actually a blithering idiot without either the cross-gender communicative (English) skills or basic organizational and administrative skills that *should* be required for her position and for a clear and effective resolution of the problem.

### **Workplace Transcript: Conversion Code ~**

Instead of including the workshop transcripts in their conventional location in an appendix, this paper has placed them between the situational background and the analysis of these transcripts in the hope that this will encourage and facilitate increased cross-referencing by the reader.

The original workshop transcript selected for analysis is extremely confusing as the virtual monologue is an almost incoherent jumble of false starts, inserts, incomplete statements, and transition jumps, all of which Dr. Holmes appears to interpret as conscious, feminine-gender pragmatic strategies from the speaker. The reader’s attempt to make sense of this confusing communication is further undermined by the transcript’s structure, which includes the omission of all punctuation and most capitals as well as the frequent ending of one line with an artificially-created ‘dangling’ preposition and the starting of the following line with the remainder of that phrase. In order to make all of its workplace transcripts more accessible to language students, the textbook, *Workplace Talk in Action* (Riddiford and Newton, page 91) considered it expedient to tamper with Discourse Analysis convention by altering the original line arrangements and numbering system and by creating a proper sentence format.

In order to facilitate a ready understanding from its readership, this paper has also broken with Discourse Analysis convention by not limiting the presentation of the analysed workplace transcript to its original layout. Instead, in order to present the gist of the transactions in a more readily understandable format, the transcript has been processed through three stages: {A} its raw state, with both the original content and format intact; {B} a processed state, in which the original content remains in its entirety while being reorganized into a more logical presentation; and, {C} a refined state, in which the verbal ‘impurities’ have been removed and the two transactions have been presented logically. Throughout these three versions, the original – unsatisfactory – line arrangement and numbering have been retained in order to permit an easy comparison of the different versions of the transcript. Also, the same ‘font code’, explained below, has been utilized throughout the three versions to highlight the different socio-pragmatic functions of the language used - since publishing limitations have prevented the use of a more effective colour-code.



\* \* \* \* \*

**WORKPLACE TRANSCRIPTS {A}{B}{C}****TRANSCRIPT CODE****Character Code -**

Ruth: lower case letters // NELL (= 13. only): UPPER CASE LETTERS

**Discourse Devices -**

Regular discourse items: normal type.

Omissions as tentative additions: {wave underline normal type with braces}.

Praise: dot-dash-dot underline italic type.

Conciliatory forms- inclusive pronouns: dotted-underline italic type.

Hedging devices- 'plausibility shields': thick-underline italic type;

modals: double-underline italic type;

**adverbs: bold italic type;**

*concessive conjunctions: italic type.*

**Speech Disfluencies -**

Hesitation phenomena- **fillers: bold type;**

**filled pauses: underline bold type;**

**non-verbals: dashed-underline bold type.**

False starts (self-repaired): ~~striketrough (normal) type~~.

**Symbols -**

[[ "... "]] = transcriber observation; [[ "... ? "]] = transcriber uncertainty;

{{ "... "}} = extra word caught (by me); {{ ? }} = extra word missed (by me);

+ = pause; ++ = extended pause; << "... ">> = privacy issue;

(first line) / "... " \ and (next line) / "... " \ = simultaneous speech.

**Notes for {C} Transcript -**

[1] A list of "Speech Disfluencies" edited out of {C} Transcript:

(A) "false starts (self-repaired)": It's actually quite; it's; I just have; the organization wouldn't; that; is could; in terms of; that...the organization has; provides; does not have...; that this is (LIKE).

(B) "hesitation phenomena": I mean (x3); see; like; um (x3); inhales; tut.

(C) "plausibility shields"\*: I just think; I think (x3); I can't remember exactly; I think it was.

**Further notes for {A}, {B}, & {C} Transcripts -**

[2] Possible "Hedging Items" that have not been treated as such:

a someone; whether or not (x2); any chance of something; a group like this.

[3] "Proper-Name Capitals" omitted to match the original transcript:

(A-U) = auckland university; (S) = stacey (1 of 2).

\* \* \* \* \*

*{A} UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT: ORIGINAL ORDER and UNCUT*

**TRANSACTION #1**

1. It's ~~actually quite~~
2. I mean it's it's well written [[inhales]]
3. ~~I just have~~ I just think
4. the approach is ~~could should~~ be *a bit* different
5. ~~in terms of~~
6. ~~see like the organization wouldn't~~
7. ~~we~~ wouldn't *usually* say something like this ~~that~~
8. I mean it's true
9. but um we should probably put in there
10. ~~that um the organization has~~
11. what ~~we~~ did *actually* in terms of providing advice
12. on other avenues of funding //but\ that the organization=
13. /MM\
14. ~~=provides~~ is a policy advice organization
15. and ~~does not have~~ um ++
16. they *actually* have *only* limited funding for sponsorship +

**TRANSACTION #2**

17. {{and}} I've *just* realized though ~~that this is~~ {{LIKE?}}
18. that they go in a couple of weeks
19. it might have been worth talking to stacey <<name>>
20. about um funding ~~through~~ *I think* it's through <<name of
- 21<sub>ab</sub> funding agency>> {{ ? }} last year ~~we~~ got funding for
22. [[tut(s)]] a someone from auckland university to
23. attend an international conference [[drawls]]: in: India
24. *I think + I can't remember exactly* the criteria
- 25<sub>ab</sub> but there is a fund there and it ~~may~~ might be *a bit* late
26. but *just I mean* Stacey knows the contacts
27. and *I think* it's in <<name of funding agency>>
28. and whether or not it's worth having a talk with them about
29. whether or not there is any chance of something [[voc/FOR?]]
30. a group like this putting in an application
31. if ~~we~~ supported it
32. cos what happened this last time was
33. ~~we~~ wrote to <<name of funding agency>> I think it was
34. and ~~we~~ supported the application and it got through

.....

**{B} EDITED TRANSCRIPT: LOGICAL ORDER but UNCUT**

**TRANSACTION #1**

1. It's ~~actually quite~~
  2. I mean it's it's well written ~~[[inhales]]~~
  3. ~~I just have~~ I just think
  6. ~~see like the organization wouldn't~~
  7. ~~we wouldn't~~ usually say something like this ~~that~~
  4. the approach is ~~could~~ should be *a bit* different
  5. ~~in terms of~~
  8. I mean it's true
  9. but um we should probably put in there
  10. ~~that um~~ the organization has
  11. what ~~we~~ did actually in terms of providing advice
  12. on other avenues of funding //but\ that the organization=
  13. /MM\
  14. ~~=provides~~ is a policy advice organization
  15. and ~~does not have um~~ ++
  16. they actually have *only* limited funding for sponsorship +
- .....

**TRANSACTION #2**

17. {{and}} I've just realized though ~~that this is~~ ~~{{(LIKE)}}~~
  18. that they go in a couple of weeks
  19. it might have been worth talking to stacey <<name>>
  20. about um funding ~~through~~ I think it's through <<name of<sub>(21a)</sub> funding agency>>
  - 21<sub>b</sub>. {{ ? }} last year ~~we~~ got funding for
  22. ~~[[tut(s)]]~~ a someone from auckland university to
  23. attend an international conference ~~[[drawls]]~~; in: India <sub>(24.)</sub> I think
  24. + I can't remember exactly the criteria
  - 25<sub>a</sub>. but there is a fund there
  27. and I think it's in <<name of funding agency>>
  - 25<sub>b</sub>. and it ~~may~~ might be *a bit* late
  26. but just I mean Stacey knows the contacts
  28. and *whether or not* it's worth having a talk with them about
  29. whether or not there is any chance of something ~~[[voc/FOR?]]~~
  30. a group like this putting in an application
  31. if ~~we~~ supported it
  32. cos what happened this last time was
  33. ~~we~~ wrote to <<name of funding agency>> I think it was
  34. and ~~we~~ supported the application and it got through
- .....

.....  
**{C} EDITED TRANSCRIPT: LOGICAL ORDER and CUT**

**TRANSACTION #1**

1. ---
2. it's well written ---
3. ---
6. ---
7. we wouldn't usually say something like this
4. the approach should be **a bit** different
5. ---
8. ---it's true
9. we --- should probably put in there
10. ---
11. what we did **actually** in terms of providing advice
12. on other avenues of funding //but\ that the organization=
13. /MM\\
14. =is a policy advice organization
15. and ++
16. they **actually** have **only** limited funding for sponsorship +

.....  
**TRANSACTION #2**

17. {[and]} I've **just** realized *though* ...
18. that they go in a couple of weeks
19. it might have been worth talking to stacey <<name>>
20. about funding --- it's through <<name of <sub>(21a)</sub> funding agency>>
- 21<sub>b</sub> last year we got funding for
22. --- a someone from auckland university to
23. attend an international conference [drawls]:in: India <sub>(24)</sub> ---
24. + --- the criteria
- 25<sub>a</sub> but there is a fund there
27. and --- it's in <<name of funding agency>>
- 25<sub>b</sub> and it might be **a bit** late
26. but --- Stacey knows the contacts
28. and whether or not it's worth having a talk with them about
29. whether or not there is any chance of something [[voc/FOR?]]
30. a group like this putting in an application
31. if we supported it
32. cos what happened this last time was
33. we wrote to <<name of funding agency>> ---
34. and we supported the application and it got through

.....  
 \* \* \* \* \*

### **Workplace Transcript: An Analysis ~**

This virtual monologue employs an incredible number of relational devices designed to facilitate the two, major workplace transactions from this one-sided conversation between a supervisor and her junior. In addition, very little that is involved in these transactions can, in fact, be analyzed without properly considering the importance of the gender element in this informal, woman-to-woman business meeting.

#### ***Four Utterances Specifically Expressing Transactional Goals -***

##### ***(a) Transaction #1:***

This informal meeting takes place as a result of Ruth's initial transactional objective of persuading Nell that she must modify her funding rejection letter so that it effectively reflects the official responsibilities of their NGO employer. Notwithstanding the fact that Ruth has already made the decision and is actually very specifically giving directives as to how the letter must be written, Ruth's tentative wording falsely suggests that she is *actually* negotiating for Nell's agreement and cooperation in re-writing the letter according to very specific guidelines that are presented to her as mere suggestions – that is, a 'soft sell' of a 'hard' product in order to placate Nell's 'negative face needs'. The general transactional objective is expressed by: "4. The approach should be a bit different", which employs the modal 'should' to make the communication less direct (Riddiford & Newton, page 113), and the qualifier '(a) bit' to minimize the issue (Riddiford & Newton, page 114). Actually, however, this general transaction can more specifically be divided into the following two transactional objectives, a negative one and a positive one.

A negative utterance employed in the initial transaction is rather obliquely insinuated as an apparently negotiable "7. we wouldn't usually say something like this". A qualifier ("usually") is again employed to minimize the issue (Riddiford & Newton, page 114). At the same time, the blow is softened and the communication is made more indirect by employing the modal 'would' and by switching from an accusative 'you' to an inclusive 'we'. Despite Ruth's supportive wording, however, Nell must still clearly understand it to mean 'Do not say this in the letter (even though we both know that it is true)'.

A positive utterance employed in the first transaction suggests that the pri-

mary focus of the letter should be shifted in order to absolve the NGO of any responsibility for its failure to provide funding. This is accomplished by Ruth providing very specific instructions in: "9. we should probably put in there...11. what we actually did {in terms of providing advice 12. On other avenues of funding but that the organization...14. is a policy advice organization 15. and...16. they actually have only limited funding for sponsorship"}". Once again, 'we' replaces 'you', and a modal ('should') and qualifiers ('probably' and 'actually') are employed for the same 'inclusive' effect, while the past tense ('did') is added to soften the blow (Riddiford & Newton, page 113). Despite Ruth's gentle suggestion, however, Nell must still clearly understand that, in fact, there is no room for negotiation as the disclaimer regarding NGO responsibility must be included in the letter.

**(b) Transaction #2:**

The second transactional objective develops spontaneously during the meeting when Ruth suddenly and inexplicably realizes that further consideration of the rejection letter might actually be premature as there might still be an opportunity to find the requested funding. Although no clear directives are presented to Nell, the situation that Ruth describes can only be interpreted as a fresh opportunity for Nell to reconsider this funding application provided she handles it in strict accordance with the two disguised directives half-buried among Ruth's ruminations.

The initial dictate of the spontaneous second transactional goal is almost completely obscured in the wishful past tense statement "19. it *might have been* worth talking to Stacey ([name])". Within this narrow context, it would seem to amount to a negative utterance with the apparent assumption that any constructive action is now too late. Nevertheless, within the total transactional context, Ruth still expects that this must actually be understood by Nell to be a directive to immediately initiate communication with Stacey in order to determine whether or not it is, in fact, too late to approach the funding agency. As such, this negative statement can actually be viewed as constituting an initial directive based on positive wishful thinking.

Although the second dictate from this spontaneous second transactional goal also attempts to avoid being identified as a directive at the expense of

*again* creating some potential structural and communicative confusion, there remains no doubt that it is intended as a positive utterance. What should have been the operative, imperative main clause [“(Assuming it is not too late) find out from the funding agency”] is totally omitted. This leaves only the subordinate clause expressing the conditional “29. whether or not there is any chance of something {[voc/FOR?]} 30. a group like this putting in an application 31. if we supported it.” Ruth seems to have gone to a ‘Japanese-like’ extreme by using the most vague, most indefinite language in order to make the directive as indirect as possible (Riddiford & Newton, page 114) so as to avoid any display of power/authority. Nevertheless, the context should still make it sufficiently clear to Nell as to what Ruth expects her to do.

#### ***Four Utterances Specifically Expressing Relational Goals -***

(Example 1:) Nell’s only participation in the two transactional components of this dialogue is a single “mm”. Nonetheless, this is an extremely important relational utterance. Holmes (*Women, Men, and Politeness*, pp. 55 to 59) states that minimal responses such as “mm” are almost always meant as *encouraging* minimal responses, or back-channeling, designed to show that the listener is listening attentively, willing to hear more, and encouraging the speaker to proceed, at least when such an utterance comes from a woman listener, such as Nell.

By contrast, Ruth expends a considerable amount of calculated effort in expressing her relational goals. In accordance with the Social Constructionist Approach, it is obvious that Ruth is going to extremes in both transactions to construct an identity as a boss who does not resort to utilizing her positional power to force her subordinates into subservient acquiescence. Instead, Ruth depends entirely upon her ‘transformational leadership’ style to gain the voluntary cooperation of her workplace subordinates in order to achieve her workplace objectives.

#### ***(a) Transaction #1:***

In the illocutionary domain, Ruth uses at least two overt examples of ‘rapport enhancement’ at this time of constructive criticism to reassure Nell that she is meeting Nell’s needs for positive face as well as to show that she is clearly on Nell’s side. (Example 2:) The elevation of the ‘quality face’ compliment about Nell’s letter-writing skills from “1. it’s actually quite” to “2. it’s well-written” is

designed to cater to Nell's 'positive face needs' by reassuring her that she has actually done a good job in drafting the letter and that the problem does not extend beyond something in the letter's content. (Example 3:) Perhaps in accordance with 'social identity' face needs, Ruth's admission that "8. I mean it's true", makes it clear to Nell that her boss considers that she has actually not done anything wrong. By treating this as merely a procedural matter about which Nell has not previously been informed through no fault of her own, Ruth's efforts at rapport enhancement successfully prevent any indication that Nell should feel that she has undergone a 'face-threatening act'.

**(b) Transaction #2:**

Ruth has also been excessively cautious in terms of Nell's 'negative face needs' and 'sociality rights' by not specifically spelling out what Nell should do towards satisfying the second transactional goal. (Example 4:) Both utterances "19. it might have been worth talking to Stacey ([name])" and "29. whether or not there is any chance of something {[voc/FOR?]} 30. a group like this putting in an application" fail to include any instructional directives, technically leaving it completely up to Nell whether to choose to accept the clues as to the actions that are actually desired by Ruth and, therefore, ultimately required from Nell.

**Workplace Transcript: A Critique of Analytical Limitations ~**

The analyst faces innumerable uncertainties in an analysis of this workplace transcript as a result of its limited length. The conversation's uniqueness, brevity, confusion, and one-sidedness leave so much unanswered and open to individual interpretation. This can be particularly dangerous in this case because the analytical tools and framework provided by Dr. Holmes and her cohorts clearly start from a definite socio-political agenda involving a fixed set of assumptions, such as the universal applicability of the strategies employed in 'social constructionism' with regard to power and gender.

Ironically, it is the extreme over-abundance of apparent gender, power, and gender-power strategies that can be found in this very short, one-sided dialogue that prove to be something of a minefield for this analyst. The initial reaction to all of this evidence would seem to support Dr. Holmes' findings that the transcript builds a strong case for the efficacy of the rules of 'social construction-



ism' as these examples can readily be attributable to the sophisticated socio-linguistic skills and the disingenuous artifice of a female managerial genius. Unfortunately, an excessive overabundance of these examples can also be "too much of a good thing" that might, more aptly, be associated with the communicative incompetence and limited intelligence of an ingenuously artless and idiotic manager. However, neither of these alternatives rules out the possibility that a mid-way alternative is equally possible since a manipulative fool not only may consciously and effectively use some 'social construction skills' but also may blunder upon others without having any intention to do so or any realization as to what may actually have been done. Yet, it should be the researcher's responsibility to impartially label each possibility as a conscious strategy or as merely a happy coincidence. Such impartiality becomes both difficult and suspect when Dr. Holmes clearly starts from a politicized point of view, if not an actual political agenda, as evidenced by her formulations of power and gender.

The limited number of samples of other possible workplace conversations involving situations sufficiently similar to these two transactions to warrant generalizations also creates several problems for the researcher and the analyst alike. The probable uniqueness of this transcribed situation decreases the likelihood that any observations will be repeated often enough in other transcribed situations to warrant certifiable observational generalizations and to provide any pedagogical applicability. This uniqueness also increases the possibility that any potentially generalizable observations might actually be attributable to the individual idiosyncrasies of the participants or to unique factors in their workplaces, such as a special office environment or an unusual power 'interface'. Our understanding and judgment of this apparently one-sided discussion might totally shift with the provision of either an introduction and a conclusion to this conversation or sufficient background information about the participants and this particular situation. Even the apparently simple acceptance of the minimal "mm" from Nell as a typical expression from a woman indicating agreement with Ruth's efforts and a desire to encourage her to continue with the direction of her comments might drastically change by considering its (overlapped) timing or its tone of speech, while nothing proves whether Ruth's continued discourse has actually been positively affected by Nell's relational utterance "mm"

as has automatically been assumed will happen according to 'social constructionism'.

Another problem is that utterances may have more than one intentional or coincidental effect. Dr. Holmes, herself, concurs that aspects of workplace talk can be extremely complex even as to their primary motivation. The earlier analysis of the 'relational' wording of examples 2 and 3 of the four relational goal utterances clearly shows how communicative functions may overlap. For example, the 'flattering' "2. I mean it's well written" as well as the 'admission' "8. I mean it's true" are clearly face-saving relational devices specifically intended to make Nell feel better about Ruth's plan to have her re-write the rejection letter. At the same time, however, their timing makes it clear that Ruth also regards these two as serving her transactional objectives. They have not been coincidentally dropped into this conversation without regard to their effect on the outcome of the desired transaction. If Ruth had thought that there might have been any possibility that her praise of Nell's writing style in the rejection letter or her admission about the truth of what Nell had said in that letter would have encouraged Nell to feel justified in resisting Ruth's initial transactional goal of having the letter re-written, then Ruth would not have uttered them during that initial transaction. Either Ruth would have permanently buried these relational utterances without having ever utilized them and simply 'let sleeping dogs lie', or she would have delayed using them until after the successful completion of Ruth's initial transactional goal when they could have been used strictly as relational utterances with the objective of repairing any resultant relational damage existing between them. The fact that Ruth was using these face-saving devices consciously, and perhaps even primarily, as a means to ease the 'pain' for Nell expressly in order to facilitate gaining Nell's cooperation in achieving her first transactional objective clearly shows the problem of simply labeling them as relational utterances.

### **Workplace Transcript: A Critique of Research Neutrality ~**

Although admittedly this observation reeks of sexism, Dr. Holmes appears to have a lesser need than most male researchers to obsessively safeguard their own professional credibility by focusing on being totally clinical, balanced, and

neutral in their research methodologies and analyses even at the expense of the general welfare. Consistent with her findings about the transactional priorities of males and the relational priorities of females, Dr. Holmes seems to display a greater willingness than her male counterparts to take sides in order to protect and justify women's marked presence in the male-dominated workplace by focusing her research methodologies and analyses on positive findings that can be accommodated within her 'grand scheme' and either simply absorbing contrary evidence into her model or failing to pursue it altogether. However noble her socio-political efforts might seem, however, her research objectives and research credibility are both hampered by her 'soft' approach.

In *Women, Men, and Politeness*, one example of Dr. Holmes' biased attention is her division of descriptive time and attention spent on speech acts. *Positive* speech acts are subdivided into the two categories of supportive interruptions and back-channeling, which are differentiated in terms of overlapping speech. By contrast, all negative speech acts are carelessly grouped together and virtually ignored as unsupportive responses as they are neither divided into categories nor discussed in terms of overlapping speech (Holmes, *WM&P*, page 56). These two negative alternatives must surely occur and should warrant equal time and attention; however, if they do not exist, this unnatural absence must be explained away. The fact that the text admits (Holmes, *WM&P*, page 58) to an unexpectedly complex pattern of interactions which cannot yet be clearly understood in terms of gender differences is a virtual admission that all possible avenues of discovery must first be fully explored and accounted for before Dr. Holmes should be able to reach the conclusions which she has already made. At best, this is an example of sloppy and biased research.

In much the same way, *Language in the Workplace: Overview and Introduction* unwisely restricts relational or interpersonal workplace objectives to those "aimed at maintaining *good* relations between people at work" (Holmes, *L...W*, page 11). First, "good" is generally regarded as an unnecessarily unclassifiable value judgment unsuited to research objectivity. Second, although 'good' should generally be unclassifiable, the restrictive limitation of Dr. Holmes' discussion to 'good relations' still manages to suggest that it would exclude any consideration of the relative merits of relational objectives designed

by certain kinds of 'immoral' leadership to foster fearful attention, blind obedience, or even socially-distant and hierarchically-rigid relationships, although certain institutions (as varied as sweat shops, prisons, and political parties) actually prefer such management styles to achieve their doubtful objectives. Indeed, Tutton's recent article (Bibliography) suggests that 'bullying' bosses may be more productive in any working environment. Perhaps "aimed at maintaining what is perceived as appropriate relations between people at work" would be more research-neutral, more all encompassing, and less open to any criticism that such research supports a particular socio-political agenda – as admirable as Dr. Holmes' agenda might be.

Most importantly, Dr. Holmes' gender-based model of "features of 'feminine' and 'masculine' interactional style" (Holmes, L...W, pages 6-10) is sexually-biased in many ways. Firstly, – at least according to this writer's family and, almost certainly, the British-Commonwealth 'national' culture he shares with Dr. Holmes, – virtually all of the terms listed under 'masculine' are considered negative terms, including: 'confrontational, dominating, aggressive', (and, perhaps, even 'task and referentially oriented', as well, as they suggest 'cold, ruthless, and unfeeling'); whereas, virtually all of the terms listed under 'feminine' are considered positive terms, – according to the same two cultures, – including 'conciliatory, facilitative, collaborative, supportive' (and, perhaps, even 'person and affectively oriented', as well, as they suggest 'warm, caring, and feeling'). Thus, Dr. Holmes has made "the bad guys" 'masculine' and "the good guys" 'feminine'. Categorizing these personal characteristics according to a positive and negative 'gender' and selecting negative terms to describe these so-called 'masculine' characteristics and positive terms to describe these so-called 'feminine' characteristics *appears* to be unfairly biased against men and biased towards women. It appears strange that someone who is so conscious of the negative social impact of sexual stereotyping of women should have no trouble labeling men according to a sexual stereotype. Ideally, the model categories should not be gender-based, while more neutral terms should be chosen to describe the characteristics of both categories if research neutrality is to be attempted and sexual stereotyping avoided.

Secondly, this writer's personal, social, and business experiences suggest

the unsuitability of a model of interactional style that is divided across gender lines. Without raising any doubts about their masculinity, certain types of grown men appear even more likely than most women to possess the so-called 'feminine' features listed in this model. Notwithstanding the fact that some witnesses may be concerned about either their femininity or their sexuality, certain types of young girls and women may flaunt the so-called "masculine" features listed here even more obviously than most boys and men do. As Dr. Holmes' admits this herself, the validity of such a gender-specific model should be reconsidered.

Thirdly, Dr. Holmes herself admits the possibility that such a gender-based model of interactional style would not be appropriate for non-European cultures. This is certainly the case with Asian societies. Japan defines itself, under its male-dominated leadership, mostly in terms of these so-called 'feminine' features. Both men and women and people with power and people with little or no power are expected to possess these 'feminine' features equally in order to continue both Japan's successful economic development and non-confrontational social stability and possession of the so-called 'masculine' features has tended to be strongly discouraged. By contrast, China, (and, perhaps, Korea) boasts of possessing the so-called "masculine" features in abundance and believes all Chinese citizens, regardless of gender or power, should foster these features which can drive China's dramatic growth in power. While, Dr. Holmes' model may be appropriate for New Zealand's pre-World War II and baby-boomer generations, this writer is suspicious about its applicability to modern 'American' cultures where interactional styles seem to be generational. Young girls and younger women are far more likely to possess the so-called "masculine" traits designed to empower them than their grandmothers, and even mothers, did. By contrast, the American power pool rushed to adopt the so-called 'feminine' traits for both men and women in their corporations during the Japanese decade of success and then discarded them, not because they didn't work there or couldn't be applied there, but because of Japan's fall from economic grace. It follows that recent Chinese and Korean economic success may encourage the adoption by both men and women in the business communities of the United States and even Japan of the 'masculine' business models of the new Asian super powers.

Finally, across most cultures, the point of all of this is that gender is not the determining factor between these two sets of interactional features. Power is. It doesn't matter whether the society describes itself according to a 'feminine' set of virtues, as Japan does, or according to a 'masculine' set of attitudes, as China does. Regardless of gender, the less power that one has, the more likely that Chinese or Japanese person is to choose, or be forced to choose, to display the 'feminine', or 'weak', set of 'virtues'; the more power that one has, the more likely that person is to choose, or be permitted to choose, to display the 'masculine', or strong, set of 'attitudes'. A decrease in role status or power is likely to require the display of increased 'feminine' characteristics and the greater the likelihood of adopting a 'feminine' and even subservient persona, or to suffer the consequences otherwise; whereas, an increase in role status or power within the family or business environment is likely to provide the opportunity to display increased 'masculine' characteristics and a 'dominant' persona – or to lose that power if he cannot do so. The question remains the extent to which power and status, and changes in that power and status are reflected in interactional linguistic features. By rigidly aligning her interactional model to gender, Dr. Holmes is denied the opportunity to fully examine the potential dynamics and cross-gender generalities of interactional linguistic styles.

### **Relevance of this research field to pedagogy in general -**

The general results of Dr. Holmes' research have presented this writer with two very confusing issues that must be addressed before actually dealing with Japanese L2 students regardless of the actual teaching methodology that is to be employed.

#### **(a) 'Timing is everything':**

There appears to be a strong disconnect between the purpose of Dr. Holmes' sympathetic studies of the socio-linguistic cultures of both the native Maori population and the Western women of New Zealand and Dr. Holmes' attempts to facilitate the training of these groups for effective performance in workplaces dominated by Western male culture. It is never made very clear whether the socio-linguistic analyses of these socio-economically disadvantaged groups is meant: simply to describe what actually goes on *outside* the 'Western'

workplace; specifically to create a more sensitive environment for a broader acceptance of their linguistic norms *within* that workplace culture; or merely to act as a starting point from which these groups must be prepared to compete in an unchanging and unaccepting Western, male-dominated workplace.

An unanswered corollary to this dilemma is the extent to which, and the speed with which, the student's L1 culture is to be respected, ignored, or challenged in the L2 classroom. Awareness of these cultural differences exposed by Dr. Holmes' research has re-confirmed the importance of using the L2 classroom to educate any student from a 'soft-sell', non-confrontational society, such as Japan's, to the cultural aspects of a 'hard-sell', adversarial English-speaking society. At the same time, however, must come awareness of the possibility that prematurely utilizing a Western approach in that classroom may be counter-productive to maximized learning.

One question arising from this dilemma involves the time that should be allowed in the L2 classroom for students to formulate responses to a teacher's questions, particularly to 'thinking' or 'opinion' questions. This writer has frequently observed the cultural insensitivity of L2 native speaker teachers to the socio-psychological needs of Japanese students by failing to allow them sufficient time or to wait empathetically as students attempted to process their answers and formulate their English even though later examination indicated student possession of appropriate information for suitable responses. Later teacher's room criticism of these students for being stupid or mindless suggests that the students' 'face' and motivation had both been sacrificed to satisfy the instructor's personal need to maintain a rapid tempo in class rather than to teach the students anything about cross-cultural discourse.

Despite possible implications from the fact that an understanding of the L1 socio-linguistic culture warrants attention and the fact that the complementary course and textbook are reserved for high-intermediate students, Dr. Holmes fails to address the issue of how long L2 students should be nurtured in a protected environment of 'teacher talk', neutral accents, classroom texts, and traditional language-learning traditions before being exposed to, trained in, and judged by the elements of natural conversation, authentic texts, and the rules of L2 social discourse, including an English assertiveness standard.

**(b) 'Saying it like it is':**

The second general implication for dealing with Japanese students actually comes directly from this writer's shocked reaction to the workshop transcripts in general but to the one examined here in particular and to their implications for the use of authentic materials in the classroom.

Perhaps it is extended time away from Western culture that makes it difficult for this writer to believe that Ruth is a typical native speaker, that typical native speakers really communicate in such a confusing and incoherent manner, and that when they do so, they are, as Dr. Holmes suggests, actually consciously adopting these discourse patterns to facilitate relational and transactional objectives – at least as long as that speaker is a woman. This writer is extremely shocked by how disorganized, fragmented, and inefficient transcribed native speaker talk – especially from women – actually *appears* to be. As a result, this writer is also totally uncertain how to approach this apparent phenomenon pedagogically especially when considering the communicative approaches' emphasis on authentic materials. Is it more important for the student to be exposed to native discourse – even if it is so confusing that the native speaker has trouble following it – simply because it is authentic and may include gender-appropriate interactional strategies? Or, is it more important for the student to be exposed to materials that motivate because they are understandable and provide linguistic examples that can be successfully reproduced by the student?

Regardless of course focus or level, this writer has always considered it important to draw students' attention to the fact that English was not the straightforward language that they had been led to believe. This involved complicating language studies by incorporating the social elements of dialogue, including: joking, teasing, sarcasm, euphemisms, *double entendres*, as well as tonal meaning, body language, and facial expressions into classroom lessons. At the same time, however, this writer has also avoided language tapes that were heartlessly fast and accents that were difficult for native speakers as well as abbreviated native-like texts that made it impossible for the language learner to understand what the native speaker had cut. Student level, motivational factors, and student needs have always come before authenticity.



**Teachability: A Critique of ‘Exportability’ ~**

This writer has definite reservations about using these workplace transcripts to teach ‘gender-appropriate’ language at a time when glossing over linguistic gender differences would appear to facilitate the advancement of women in the workplace, while perpetuating these differences would appear to provide ammunition for continuing women’s second class status in a male-dominated workplace rather than increasing the acceptance of women on their own terms. Nevertheless, the fact that these New Zealand workplace materials are being successfully used to prepare advanced English learners to enter specific New Zealand workplaces with the specialized socio-linguistic skills required to fit into their new workplace communities clearly demonstrates some of the advantages of using authentic materials in the L2 classroom. The question remains, however, whether they would be equally suitable as authentic materials in Japanese and other Asian L2 classrooms. The easiest answer would be ‘not yet’.

First, it is significant that New Zealand has not attempted to employ these authentic materials in low-level ESL classrooms. Very few EFL students in Japan are at the same level as the New Zealand L2 students exposed to these materials. Since lower level New Zealand EFL students would first be expected to gain general English skills before concerning themselves with English in the workplace, it follows that the same approach should be followed in Japan’s EFL classrooms.

Second, the New Zealand programme employs these materials not because they are authentic texts so much as because they are appropriate preparation for specific New Zealand workplaces. That should mean, for example, that these materials would be far less suitable as appropriate preparation for advanced ESL students entering North American workplaces requiring very different socio-linguistic skills. Such students would be better off using authentic materials based on transcripts from North American workplaces. It must logically follow that even advanced Japanese EFL students who might never visit either New Zealand or North America and who will almost certainly never enter workplaces in those countries would not particularly benefit from the specialized L2 socio-linguistic skills offered by regionally-authentic workplace materials.

Although Dr. Holmes may be right that there is no neutral language and

only gendered language, this writer is still inclined to think that a neutral language – developed similarly to the ‘gendered’ blend of ‘transformational leadership’ acknowledged by Dr. Holmes– is the best alternative for an EFL learner, both in the classroom and, eventually, in the workplace. If authentic materials cannot provide neutral language skills to lower-level Japanese EFL students, or possibly even to upper-level Japanese EFL students without specialized overseas aspirations, then it is quite possible that the CLT emphasis on authentic materials should be ignored until such time as student L2 language skills and student needs analysis indicate that authentic materials are pedagogically advantageous.

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