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# Oral Competency of ESL Technical Students in Workplace Internships

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## Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of university students in Canada speak a home language other than English, which can put added pressure on the kinds of linguistic, cultural, and academic support they may require in their tertiary education and in the workplace. Indeed, communication difficulties can surface in the workplace for students during internship placements. This article discusses the challenges that ESL engineering students have and the strategies they use to acquire oral competency while on their internship placements. The students in this study participated in a sixteen-month internship in a research and development unit of a software company. Findings reveal that learning technical language was the main priority. However, challenges revolved around conversational aspects of communication that required the ability to use and understand colloquial language, idioms, and slang, as well as to recognize cultural practices in face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions. Pedagogical implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs are discussed.

## Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of university and college students in Canada speak a home language other than English, which can put added pressure on the kinds of linguistic, cultural and academic support these students may require in their tertiary education and in the workplace. Several research studies in Canada (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Li, 2007; Myles, 2002; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Raymond & Parks, 2002), have investigated the difficulties faced by ESL students and how they adjust to their studies at the university level. Communication challenges, however, can also surface in the workplace for students during internship placements or active employment following graduation.

This article discusses the challenges that ESL engineering students have in acquiring oral competency, including computer-mediated communication, while on their full time work placements. I describe the kinds of oral communication that take place in such an environment, and I address specific communicative and cultural challenges ESL interns can face with regard to participating in meetings and team projects, and

engaging in small talk and professional interactions. I follow with suggestions for curriculum that addresses both linguistic and cultural functions of communication.

The research reported is part of a larger qualitative study whose purpose is to investigate the acculturation process and the development of communicative competence in ESL engineering students preparing for professional careers in such technical-oriented workplaces. The central research question is as follows: What are the experiences, particularly communication experiences, of ESL interns in the workplace? More specifically, the objectives are to:

1. identify a range of communication tasks that commonly recur in a workplace that employs technical students as interns;
2. ascertain how ESL students adjust to the demands of these workplace tasks while they are on their internship, particularly in the area of oral communication; and
3. recommend appropriate pedagogical approaches with regard to language instruction and cultural orientation to the professional workplace.

## Linguistic Behaviour in the Multicultural Workplace

Since many researchers are cognizant of diversity among individuals within social contexts, much qualitative research is taking place in the area of language, language training, and literacy in the multilingual, multicultural workplace (Bayley & Schecter, 2003; Belfiore & Folinsbee, 2002; Bremer et al., 1996; Goldstein, 1997; Roberts et al., 1992). The aim of these studies has been to document both written and oral linguistic behaviour in particular workplace contexts due to the large numbers of new immigrants in the workforce who are English language learners. Through discourse analysis, ethnographic interviews and participant observation, researchers gain an understanding of how minority workers are positioned in encounters and interactions with their co-workers, supervisors and employers in a workplace setting.

## Oral Communication in Intercultural Encounters

Studies focusing on spoken discourse within multilingual workplace settings have been valuable to our understanding of how non-native speakers of a language interact with native speakers and negotiate meaning to increase communicative effectiveness. Much research on spoken interaction has also taken place in American and Canadian contexts. Examples include Li's (2000) case study of the way one Chinese immigrant woman learned to make requests in the workplace. Li not only looks at the level of directness in the speech act performance, but also the development of her subject's social identity as she becomes a fully integrated, English speaking worker. Another study focuses on the complexities of intercultural communication and language socialization at work with regard to the participation of non-native English speakers in a program combining ESL training and nursing skills (Duff, Wong &

Early, 2000). Data came primarily from interviews and not direct observation; however, the researchers were able to note the contrast between the instructional focus of the classroom component of the program and the actual communication requirements of the diverse workplace. The researchers highlighted the fact that for many of the participants in their study, to be a successful communicator at work required more than learning English, technical and academic discourse (oral and written), and the requisite medical knowledge and skills. It also involved the ability to interpret body language, understand colloquial expressions, and the native language of other staff and clients who were also second language speakers.

From these studies of workplace interactions in English speaking countries, it becomes apparent that we can no longer make the assumption that graduates of English language and skills-based programs will go on to work in monolingual English workplaces. Indeed, the authors suggest that besides the instruction in technical English, non-verbal and interpersonal English (and multilingual) communication, students must be able to accommodate to the social and linguistic realities of the global workplace.

Although these situated studies of communicative competence are important to English in the workplace training programs for new immigrants in unskilled or lower end jobs, they may not be applicable to highly skilled newcomers who are already advanced English speakers and who already identify themselves with a particular profession. For one thing, the workplace settings may be different; we move from the shop floor of a garment industry to the high tech office of a multinational company. Communication requirements may be different as well; we move from single function language use, such as scripted talking on the phone at a call centre to multifunctions, involving problem solving through computer mediated interactions and teamwork.

Competency in English is crucial to employability and advancement to the more lucrative and often more creative niches of the workplace. Laroche (2003) discusses the particular difficulties foreign-trained professional engineers in Canada have communicating technical information in English. Some of these include presenting information at meetings which can captivate an audience, and participating in all-day interviews without undue fatigue if they are applying for jobs in research environments. With regard to email communication, he notes that some of the most common issues pertain to the amount of background and personal information, tone, grammar, and spelling.

From a sociological perspective, McAll's (2003) discussion of oral and written communication in the workplace and the relationship between different kinds of language use in the aerospace industry reveals how issues of power and domination surface and ultimately inhibit full participation of ESL engineers in a bilingual (French and English) and multilingual environment. McAll explains that there are distinct territories of engineering and production, and language plays a role in maintaining the hierarchy between "those who conceive and those who execute, or

between…."intellectual" and "manual" labor" (p. 243). Although his analysis is based on a company that employs both French and English speaking engineers, his study reveals that where work is language-centered (as opposed to language-marginal) and heavily involved in establishing communication networks, it tends to be in English. Operating instructions, process sheets and technical terms are all in English, and as such, the dominant language group ultimately exercises control over conception, production and management. In order for ESL engineers to advance into the areas where language use is most prevalent, they are required to have attained not only sufficient skills in their trade, but also a high level of proficiency in English. According to McAll, "language competence… comes to be a convenient tool for discriminating against other language groups in an apparently 'legitimate' way, since no one can deny the importance of language in order to function in areas of the labor market where language is necessary to the work process" (p. 249). More importantly, he also asserts that native English speakers are more inclined to maintain the status quo because by providing access to language competence, they increase the competition for jobs, and their own chances of gaining or maintaining access to viable employment.

In short, lack of research on how ESL engineering interns of various cultural backgrounds adapt to the workplace environment is particularly surprising in view of current immigration patterns in Canada and the fact that both universities and workplaces are becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. We also have to recognize the changing nature of work characterized by flattened hierarchies, a workforce comprising multiskilled, well-rounded workers, new social relationships, and a new language of work. According to Kalantzis and Cope (2000), the formal systems of command with written memos, formal letters and supervisors' orders have been replaced by multi-discipline or multi-function teams, which is much more dependent on informal, oral and interpersonally sensitive written forms, such as e-mail messages. As a result, the demands on people, such as ESL interns, are greater than they ever have been in the past. In this new non-linear workplace environment, these newcomers may not be entirely comfortable with the culture and discourses of the mainstream, which imply collaboration, shared values and a "discourse of familiarity" (p. 144). With regard to communication training, it is recommended that programs focus on the development of interpersonal and group skills, the ability to present and defend a project orally and in writing and the skills required to write quality emails that are not only technically sound but also clear in their attention to form, grammar, and style. These workplace exchanges are formidable challenges for all engineering students, but more so to ESL workers who are not only adapting to the micro-culture of the new workplace, but also to the macro-culture of their new environment requiring them to crossover into, what Kalantzis and Cope (2000) refer to as a different lifeworld.

In contrast to the linear, hierarchical models of the design and manufacturing proc

Language and lack of cultural knowledge may play significant roles in determining why ESL university graduates in particular have not done as well in the job market despite high levels of education and credentials. Research that recognizes the work-

place as a culturally diverse environment made up of individuals with distinct backgrounds, cultural orientations, and linguistic proficiencies, can provide useful insights for postsecondary institutions in the 21st century, which must incorporate and foster cultural and linguistic sensitivity and skills into their relations, strategies, and structures. The importance of incorporating and fostering cultural and linguistic sensitivity and skills into their relations, strategies, and structures cannot be overemphasized.

## Methodology

Over a period of six months, I conducted periodic interviews and engaged in email correspondence with four key ESL interns from China whom I call Yuan, Chen, Li and Mei. Two of the interns had been in Canada for four years, one for three years and the other for two and a half years at the time of the research. After completing two years of undergraduate study in a university applied sciences program, the students were participating in a sixteen-month internship in a research and development unit of a large computer software company. I asked them about the kind of activities they did during a workday and if these were different from what they would do in their native country. I also inquired about their perception of the most challenging language skills, participation at meetings, teamwork, and social activities. Other participants, whom I call "involved others," included interns from other universities, workplace language instructors and cross-cultural trainers, engineering faculty, and employers who work with and/or supervise student interns. In total, 34 other participants were interviewed because their contributions enabled me to get a broader understanding of the communicative challenges ESL interns face from different perspectives. According to Mason (2002) "interview methodology begins from the assumption that it is possible to investigate elements of the social by asking people to talk, and to gather or construct knowledge by listening to and interpreting what they say and to how they say it" (p. 225). I conducted interviews with my participants face-to-face, over the telephone and through asynchronous emails. The purpose of my interviews was to explore and understand the experiences of my participants and the meaning they made of those experiences. By using semi-structured, open-ended interviews, my aim was to generate data that provided an authentic insight into people's experiences.

After all the interviews and subsequent transcriptions were completed, I started reading over each transcript beginning with the key ESL intern participants, systematically writing action codes for each line to show what people were doing, extract commonalities and determine emerging analytic themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2003). In addition to the line-by-line coding, I teased out bits of data that became units of content called topics. Common topics were grouped into larger clusters to form categories and subcategories, a process referred to as the constant comparative method of data analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). These units of data were sorted into grouping that had something in common, such as keywords used to describe a situation, strategy or feeling. The four prominent areas that emerged in the process were the engineering profession, the school to workplace transition, the in-

ternship experience itself and communication challenges, which included linguistic challenges, understanding cultural aspects of communication and coping mechanisms and general language/culture learning strategies. Oral interaction was placed under the topic "Linguistic Challenges."

## Findings and Discussion

### The Predominance of Oral Communication in the Workplace

When I asked the participants which language skills ESL interns find most challenging, the unanimous response was speaking. Indeed, a great deal of oral communication goes on in the technical workplace; whether people share information in teams and working groups at formal meetings, or spontaneously discuss a popular movie at a coffee break, to communicate orally demands a high level of language proficiency and cultural knowledge. Oral communication predominates at all levels of workplace activity, and similar to what Crosling and Ward (2002) and Darling and Dannels (2003) found in their surveys of workplace oral communication business, engineering [and IT] practice take place in an intensely oral culture, not necessarily in formal speaking events, but "interpersonally, in small groups, and on teams almost daily." Researchers also discovered that "for the most part, the oral performances that are central in daily practices are conversational and informal" (Darling & Dannels, 2003, p. 12).

Chen described the centrality of oral communication in an e-mail he had written to me after four months of placement. Most of his communication with others was through face-to-face oral interaction. He also stressed how important it was to be aware of what his co-workers were doing as they collaborated on their projects. He wrote:

The communication now is almostly oral speaking. And it is really not too much writen work for a tester other than opening a defect. It is the nature of this job. Talking with or sametime to diverse professionals is a must in a daily life. When meeting a problem, discuss it with other testers, developers, team leads or managers. To work more actively, a tester will not only pay attention to his stuff only, but he need to keep an eye on the progress of other testers who are doing the different sections but of the same project as yours. Their experience may greatly save your efforts on a defect of the code. At the same time, you may get a whole idea of the product from knowing other's work.

I was also told by an employer:

Sometimes interns find it hard to describe what they are doing in a technical report because they have been developing software and using oral communication to exchange ideas... But for a lot of this stuff, there is nothing to write. It is ideas, thoughts, and they meet in a group and once they describe it, they don't have to write anything.

Spoken language primarily comes in two different forms--a monologue and a dialogue (Brown, 2001). A planned monologue is a speech or presentation; sometimes interns may be required to talk about their work progress or the results of a finding in the form of a presentation at a team meeting. An unplanned monologue is an impromptu speech, or the telling of a story or an incident in conversations. Dialogues involve two speakers and can be interpersonal or interactional in that they promote social relationships (as in a conversation) or transactional with the purpose of conveying propositional or factual information as in ordering parts over the telephone. In each case, the amount of shared knowledge and familiarity as well as the ability to negotiate meaning among interlocutors affect understanding. Some of the ESL interns mentioned to me that they had opportunities to give "monologues" in the way of presentations which were mostly updates of their work and most of the language used was technical. However, there were many more references to interpersonal and transactional communication, and the difficulties arising from those forms of interactions. I continue with a brief discussion about presentations followed by the challenges of interacting in conversations and discussions.

## Giving Presentations

The participants agreed that giving a formal presentation was much easier than initiating and maintaining a conversation; however, the opportunities to present varied among workplaces. One student informed me that "In the meeting I usually run through a presentation and tell them what I have done and ya and actually I contribute a lot actually" ; while others said that only senior people give presentations for business purposes. "I just sit and listen." When giving a presentation, Microsoft PowerPoint, pictures or drawings on a blackboard using key words were commonly used. PowerPoint seemed to be the most common technique and many of the interns had already used it at university as well. Yuan explained that using PowerPoint helped him to give a presentation especially when he had not practiced enough. Otherwise, if the presentation was short, he would practice and use simple words to explain a problem.

I can use my body language and I practice a lot of times... I think practice is very important to say the correct way. If I don't have enough practice, I will use Power point. Otherwise we will have errors. Sentences and words, which will make the problem worse. ...[If people don't understand] I will repeat what I said again and try to use another word. But sometimes I really have no idea what to do that so I will use very simple words to express a very hard problem.

Rehearsing and memorizing the text are common strategies ESL speakers often use to prepare for a presentation. The use of PowerPoint, overheads and other prompts have made the process much easier, but difficulties can arise during a question period, for example, when presenters have to "think and respond on their feet." It is in fact one of the many reasons why the transactional and interpersonal functions are so much more demanding.

## Conversation and Informal Discussion

ESL interns continually stressed the frustration they had in trying to communicate the "daily stuff" of conversation, the "taken-for granted" [if you are a native speaker of the language] process of social talking. Woodilla (1998) describes the scope of conversation in the workplace "as fragmented managerial interactions, or during meetings forming the backbone of organizational work, or labeled as gossip essential to a network of office relationships. Through conversation, relationships between individuals are established, shared meanings are developed, and contested meanings are made visible" (p. 31). Speaking and listening as components of verbal exchanges are particularly difficult for the second language speaker. However, despite the complexities involved in exchanging information or carrying on a conversation, speaking skills can improve with practice in an immersion situation (e.g., the workplace), given a certain amount of feedback, systematic self-monitoring, motivation, the ability to take risks and ask questions. Nevertheless, for many ESL newcomers, the only opportunity they have for conversing in English is in the workplace, In fact, many ESL newcomers do not "live" in English, which is especially true for those who are married to individuals from their own language and cultural groups (as were some of the ESL participants) or living in a communal arrangement within an ethnic community. One intern told me that she didn't need to speak English because she never had to use it outside the workplace. Even her job as a storm and sanitary sewer technician for a municipality only required her to "design and draw" and exchange technical information with other engineers.

Many ESL newcomers do not live in the culture either, which is another reason why small talk can be so difficult. Mei told me that speaking English was the most challenging for her, especially small talk. For example, before a team meeting, there was about 15 to 30 minutes of chit-chat--social time. During that time, she only answered questions and most of the time she didn't know what to say to people in order to maintain a conversation. Her boss would ask her how she was doing, and she would say "I'm doing fine, " without elaborating or asking him a question. Before a meeting, Canadians may talk about sports, a TV program or movie or a news item, in fact a range of issues depending on common interests. Difficulties can also occur as a consequence of more subtle issues, such as, according to a workplace trainer, when "they open their mouth and of course it is going to be with a different accent or with a different use of language or with a different vocabulary so the conversation stops because it is not quite using the markers and the way of speaking and the way of understanding or the way of laughing and joking." No doubt, cultural meaning and communicative styles interconnect with each other in any act of verbal communication. Kachru (1995) explains that utterances are more often than not comprehensible, but there may be an underlying "otherness" in the discourse and it is this otherness that can lead to a misunderstanding of the speakers' or writers' purpose or intentions. In other words, there may be a failure to communicate despite common language. What follows is a selection of common difficulties and strategies individuals use to cope with problems in what for some, is a lifetime endeavor.

## Colloquial Expressions

The inability to understand and use colloquial language (idioms, slang) seems like an uphill battle for many ESL speakers. Even for advanced learners, there are always new expressions to learn and remember. "Like we get high scores in TOEFL. That means we understand some things but some things we don't understand, maybe the words, or some strange expression, we don't understand. In some way, we are not familiar with this slang." The ESL interns had made comments about how challenging oral communication had been for them. They also realized how much they needed to practice, especially when they compared themselves to native English speakers.

Speaking [is the most difficult]. When I talk to native English speakers, wow! ... Reading, writing, I think not too bad. From my experience, I got conclusion that oral English I have to improve. I have to spend much, much time to improve. Very important ... Because otherwise as my English communication gets not bad compared to other Chinese but it is not true compared to native (laughs) speakers, ya. My colleagues, my friends, speak English very quickly different, sometimes they didn't use the technical terms, use oral terms or slang so sometimes (laugh) lots of ways.... I think for technical English, I am pretty familiar with. I am not afraid of the technical English. But for daily conversation sometimes I don't understand fully. Maybe I understand some part, not everything.

Yuan spoke passionately about his problem speaking and how his speech was becoming fossilized as he developed habits and used the same words over and over, whether they were correct or not.

Speaking is the worst thing most difficult. You will use a lot of stupid words and you will use them again and again. You will remember them forever. And you think they are good ones. If you do not know the correct way. If you know the idiom, you can speak correctly.

It is interesting to note that in my discussions with the ESL interns about the challenges of oral communication, they saw the lack of vocabulary as being the prime reason for their inability to express their thoughts and ideas in conversation. It was common for them to believe that if their vocabulary would improve, so would oral communication. Chen claimed it is best to know as many idioms as possible. However, he rarely heard people using the idioms he had previously learned in the classroom. He joked in an e-mail: "Perhaps they know I may not understand it entirely. Haha!" They were aware of the fact that in order to form relationships with people in the workplace, they had to learn idioms and slang. In fact, I was requested to send them lists of common colloquial expressions with explanations and sample sentences to show their meaning. Asking me to produce lists of words for them to memorize outside of any context was a typical classroom based strategy; it was one they had used for language testing purposes, for example, TOEFL preparation in their native country. Whether it was effective or not, or just a friendly "teaching" gesture on my

part, I satisfied their need for word lists knowing full well that memorizing words out of context may not actually help retrieving vocabulary for authentic conversation.

## Accents, Incoming Signals, Changing Topics, and "Troubling" Vocabulary

Interacting with other speakers involves a variety of demands taking place all at once: monitoring and understanding the other speaker(s), thinking about one's own contribution, producing that contribution, monitoring its effect, and so on. According to an ESL intern, "The common problem I'd imagine in most foreign people like myself, is we do not have the natural ability to process the incoming signals in real time and make sense of them on the spot." The cognitive processing of spoken language involves simultaneous activation of both top-down processing involving prediction and inferencing on the basis of prior knowledge and global expectations about language and the world, and bottom-up processing involving understanding incoming language from working out sounds to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings (Morley, 2001). Indeed, conversing with people is a dialogic exercise with enormous cognitive demands on the part of everyone in the IT or engineering community (interns, regular employees, supervisors, managers) who, in a typical multicultural workplace, have a variety of accents. During regular interactions, people either get used to each other's pronunciation of words, or if there is some misunderstanding, they can ask for clarification or repetition. One employer asserted that it was everyone's responsibility to "figure it out" and "work through it." If someone doesn't understand something, "you sit down and say sorry, I don't understand. Could you repeat that? ...We have to work together and figure it out." An ESL intern described how he would give someone a piece of paper and asked him or her to draw what he or she was asking him for in the parts shop if he could not understand his or her accent. He explained the process to me:

I give someone a paper and ask them to draw it for me or write it down for me [when I can't understand their accent]. It's all engineering stuff so I prefer drawing from them trying to explain it to me because of the fact that it can be done properly when you are drawing to explain a small part, an intricate part of the machine, you know. So basically, it is not just for international people, it's for anyone. I prefer drawing. But if I don't understand someone I just throw a paper and ask them to write it down or draw the details or whatever. [They do it quite willingly] because of the fact that it is engineering related, right? So, which means I am trying to tell them that I don't understand the concept of the machine, it is not that I don't understand their English.

Analyzing the role of accent in the act of communication is a complex affair. Lippi-Green (1997) explains that the first decision speakers make when confronted with a foreign accent is whether or not they are going to accept or reject their responsibility in what she refers to as "the communicative burden." In the engineering workplace, individuals have a strong investment in solving problems and completing tasks within time frames, and so it is advantageous for them to strive for mutual compre-

hension. Lippi-Green also argues that in many cases, a breakdown in communication between two speakers is more often the result of a speaker's negative social evaluation of an accent, and a rejection of his or her communicative burden. This quick evaluation is based on personal history, background and social selves, which in turn, form language ideology filters that ultimately affect the way we justify our reactions.

Besides coping with accents, ESL interns often mentioned the fact that they were fatigued in trying to understand native English speakers who were talking very fast and changing topics. "When you get the idea about what they are talking about and you want to talk, they change to another topic and you don't have the opportunity." It was common for them to use prediction strategies based on prior knowledge and the key words they understood, and if they still had difficulties understanding meaning, they asked questions, sometimes over and over again. For Yuan, conversing with his co-worker or "buddy" in English was an exhausting process that he could describe to me in a light-hearted way. I think it was his ability to humor himself and make a joke about his confusion and inability to remember and make accurate predictions that helped him to take risks and maintain confidence in his speaking and listening ability. He explained to me the process in a conversation I had with him at a restaurant where he actually manipulated the plates in front of him on the table to illustrate his point:

Maybe this problem have 2 steps. The first step is 'take the bowl, the second step is take the bean, the next step is eat' Yes, I understand take the bowl and when he told me take the bean, I forgot the first step because I turn all my attention to what he said and think what the word is, what is the bean....

And continued with an example of how easy it was for him to become confused and fatigued from being so persistent:

One day I ask my buddy how could I do that and what is wrong? He asked me if I did some brand new things or if I was using a brand new version? Brand new software? And I think what is brand new? I just heard new. So new is new, brand is some, the brand of this watch is ...., so what is brand new? I ask him what is brand new? And I ask him up to 15 minutes. I ask him what is brand new? So exactly what he said in this 15 minutes I didn't understand. So I had to ask him again. He said 'xin' because he understand Chinese a little bit. ....I think, I didn't know and 'xin' is the Chinese word for new, for brand new. And I thought what's 'xin' and I thought 'xin' is Chinese word but in English what's that? (laughs) oh yes, I use brand new version of this software.

Yuan was determined to learn new words and he did so by asking "people who can speak English fluently" questions, especially words like "brand new" and idioms, like "give me five." In his mind, if he continued to ask people what some English word or expression meant, he would build up his vocabulary and his communication skills would gradually improve. For him the process was cumulative, but he systematically had to work at it and get feedback. He told me he often repeated new words in his mind, asked how they were spelled and wrote them down. "Like frisbee. A lot of peo-

ple play this ... and I don't know what's that? Like flying dish? Flying saucer? Flying, what's that? So, it's not flying something. It's frisbee. So I know, could you spell that for me? And he [co-worker] spells that for me and she [co-worker] asks me what is frizbee? And I tell her." Li was more reluctant to ask his co-workers the meaning of certain words so as not to break the flow of the conversation. Instead, he would remain quiet and until he could get to an on-line dictionary to search for the meaning of words at another time. He wrote to me in an e-mail:

Once I had lunch with my colleagues together, they were talking about sports, and focusing on how dangerous the sports is. They were talking about football, which I know, but they also mentioned "frisbee", which is really new to me, then I felt I had totally lost. I didn't know what they were saying next, even a word, and was just guessing that they were saying how dangerous it is. After that I saw this word in e-mail somewhere, and looked up in the dictionary, then I realized they were joking about frisbee.

Whether Li's co-workers were joking about how dangerous playing frisbee could be or not (and we will never know), clearly not understanding the meaning of a word in the topic of conversation can lead to total misinterpretation and frustration on the part of the ESL speaker. More often than not, confusing words also have situated meanings (Gee, 1998) that assume cultural and contextual knowledge on the part of the interlocutors. If the ESL speaker does not have this knowledge, it may be difficult for him or her to employ effective predication strategies. Native English speakers can either ignore someone who is looking lost (if indeed they are even aware of that) or come to their aid. Li may prefer to look up words in his own time than to ask others for clarification; however, by doing so he is more likely to "disappear" in social conversations for lack of participation. When it comes to speaking though, many native English speakers will naturally come to the aid of ESL interns if they are stuck in conversation because they cannot find the proper words. An ESL intern explained to me:

I sometimes still cannot express myself clearly but they know. They will tell me. But they have no problem understanding me. But sometimes they will help me because sometimes they know what I want to say but I cannot come up with the word and they will tell me. They will give me a couple of words and I will say, oh, that's it.

Another ESL intern told me that it was helpful for him to see a piece of equipment if he had a difficult time visualizing what was being discussed. He would also advocate for himself by saying that as an ESL speaker, he needed more time to think. He told me:

It is difficult for me, personally for example, to listen and follow someone describing the operation of a machinery that need my technical input to improve its operation. Translation the words, into series of images to get a feel for the engineering problem difficult for me. ...Rather than looking lost and unknowing, my experience is always to insist on going to the field and seeing the equipment, and then get communicate

with them on the spot and ask questions as they come up. Also, ask that you need some time to process the information in order to respond back.

Once ESL speakers are aware of their difficulties, they often develop effective or non-effective compensatory strategies to help maintain fluency in conversation. I was told by Chen that, "most non-English speakers (especially Chinese) tend to speak as fast as they can because they consider fast speaking as fluent English speaking. But they cause troubles ….You cannot speak fast all the time without taking a breath. Very often listener may not capture your meaning." Obviously, speaking quickly and slurring words is not an effective strategy to compensate for difficulties expressing ideas in conversations. In my study, whether it was asking for clarification, looking up words in the dictionary or asking for pictures, ESL interns employed a variety of strategies to help them to become more lexically competent, which for them often involved grappling with colloquial language within the workplace community. Unlike university where the focus tends to be on listening to lectures, writing essays and reports, and reading texts, the fact that an engineering or computer company revolves around a very oral, team-based approach to producing knowledge, the opportunities to interact with others in English on a daily basis is huge in comparison. As a result, aural/oral skill learning is immediate and contextual. Improving vocabulary is also intentional or explicit, in that a systematic approach is in place, such as Yuan's idea of writing new words down and practicing their use in context, or implicit, in that new words are acquired incidentally from using language for communicative purposes. An employer maintained that most language is acquired incidentally from social talking in the lab or lunchroom or baseball field:

These kids are motivated and they don't want to appear like idiots so they go and talk to their friends and say, "Hey, does this sound like the right word to you?" And that happens and that's great… The younger people come in and they are out with their buddies and they make friends with the other students and amazingly it's kind of funny because you hear them all of a sudden, they come in of course speaking very proper English and then their accent starts to loosen up quite a bit….There is nothing better than when you hear a person leave at the end of their stay and they are using all these what I would say Eastern Ontarioisms, using terms like 'boy', and 'gee', 'can you believe that?' and 'this is crazy!'

Social strategies, such as asking questions for clarification or confirmation, asking for help, and learning about social and cultural norms and values, are often used during incidental learning. In fact, each instance of language use provides an immediate opportunity for learning new vocabulary and expressions.

## The Power of the Language: Understanding Cultural Connotations and Style

Although finding the right words to use and understanding spoken language in a particular context can be challenging, more miscommunication is actually caused by the subtle connotations embedded in meanings, and the manner in which a message

is conveyed. For the ESL speaker, understanding attitudinal and emotional language functions is a formidable task. It involves becoming skilled at processing both non-linguistic (i.e., vocal meaning and body language) and linguistic (i.e., words and their meanings) information.

Yuan was conscious of being misunderstood and using "bad language, crude language" unknowingly to his buddy or boss because people would not correct him. It was when he translated words and expressions from Chinese that he sometimes ran into difficulties. What ESL speakers say might not be what they mean to say and they may be completely unaware of why listeners react the way they do to a common question or comment. For example, "what's your problem?" is a direct translation from the French and it can work perfectly well in French. However, if spoken in English, especially with added stress on "your" or "problem," it sounds too direct and abrupt, possibly eliciting an emotive reaction of hostility or defensiveness on the part of the listener. People react more positively to "what seems to be the problem here?" In other words, "I go from being a jerk to having a customer-oriented attitude."

The point is that it is not only what one says, but also how one says it. I mentioned earlier that Chen felt that many Chinese speakers spoke English too quickly which often results in the inability of the listener to comprehend what is spoken. He also told me that he intentionally tries to speak more slowly and put emphasis on key words. He also modifies his language if he senses some confusion. He explained in an e-mail:

During the conversation, I tried to slow down my speaking. It has two major advantages. I have some time to arrange my words in good order, and I can put emphasis on key words to let listener understand myself better. If they seem to be confused shown on their faces, I would try to convey my meaning in another way, e.g., let me put it in this way, blah blah. It always leads to a smooth talking.

Rephrasing expressions based on quizzical, non-verbal feedback is an effective strategy in face-to-face conversation, as I mentioned earlier. However, many ESL speakers are not always aware of the fact that they are slurring words, being too direct or undiplomatic. One of the trainers described an engineer from Bangladesh who actually spoke language very elegantly but had significant problems speaking on the phone for being too abrupt. "But it was the style of his communication and people would say to him I don't understand you. Actually, they would say to other people, he can't speak English. Where, in fact, his English was probably more academic and far more elegant than anyone else."

Speech acts, such as greetings and salutations, complimenting, complaining, refusing, and thanking, and degrees of directness can easily be misinterpreted because of cross-cultural differences and the effects of translation. Knowing when and where a speech act is appropriate almost invariably calls for knowledge of the culture. Not being aware of one's communicative style and its appropriateness to a particular cultural context can be detrimental to forming solid working and/or social relationships in the workplace. In addition to style, misinterpreting the tone of what others are

saying and taking language to its literal meaning, especially when co-workers may be joking, can lead to ridicule and embarrassment for the ESL speaker. An ESL intern shared his story of such an exchange on his last day at his placement:

One day before I was leaving, my department tells me, okay ... could you wash my van and wax it? This is public transportation for our department so everyone can use it. Okay, our rule in our company is that every intern has to wash and clean the van and wax it before they leave. (laugh) Actually, it is a joke but when he began I don't understand. (laugh) I didn't catch it. So I asked another people because that guy is in charge of the van. So I asked him where to get some water to wash the van and where to get the wax to polish the van. But he said, don't care about it. So from that point I know it is a joke.

The joke that this ESL intern had experienced was more likely representative of a light-hearted taunt, not intended to harm or ridicule him in any way. He seemed to be able to "shrug it off," as if to say, "this is just another incident in which I didn't understand what was going on." According to Weiner (1997), two basic characteristics underlying humor is its deliberate incongruity and the assumption that members of a speech community share a coherent system of world knowledge, which encompasses "everything from conceptual definitions to rules for processing speech acts" (p. 139). Whether the challenge is understanding a punchline, or recognizing that what was said should not be taken literally, understanding humor is difficult for ESL speakers who, among other things, cannot rely on shared knowledge or contextualization cues to generate the inferences about what their co-participants intend to communicate (Gumperz, 1999).

What "we don't understand" may continue to frustrate people for years. Chen claimed that when it came to the "daily stuff," he was not sure that he would have improved much by the following year. He claimed that for ESL newcomers, oral communication would be a lifetime problem. Another ESL intern agreed with Chen, but he also recognized that improving aural/oral skills involves a step by step process over time, which can refer to a period of time spent in the course of a conversation, "Maybe when we meet the first time, I don't understand, but for a while maybe I get used to your words, how you use it and then I understood much much more," or years of living in an English speaking country. Another intern told me that he often eavesdropped on senior engineers at his workplace just to listen to the way they talked, to get used to the way words are spoken. However, with the wide use of e-mail and MSN Messenger as common modes of computer-generated communication for business and personal purposes, ESL speakers have alternatives to telephone and face-to-face interactions. In addition, they may have low competence and confidence in speech, yet perform quite satisfactorily in writing for professional purposes where the linguistic code operates on more restricted and more schematized communicative behaviours than a spontaneous social occasion.

## E-mail Correspondence: Writing in Conversational Form

The rapid rise of internet communications, particularly in the form of e-mail, has brought about an unprecedented rate of communicative exchange between individuals of differing cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Computer mediated communication (CMC) exchanges represent a hybrid genre situated somewhere between written text and spoken conversation, which makes it a unique form of text. Mason (2000) points out that if put on a continuum, simple email would be closer to the writing end and synchronous instant messaging (IM) closer to the speaking end. With regard to computer mediated interactions, e-mail communication has many benefits: it provides learners with the opportunity to use the target language in authentic communication, which can result in improved cultural awareness, increased participation, fluency and language proficiency (Warschauer, 2001). However, contexualization cues whereby we convey metamessages and infer meaning can be virtually non-existent. No doubt, without the immediate opportunity to negotiate meaning, interpret text according to shared schemata or script, and reach conclusions based on a mutual frame of reference, the chances for cyberspace conflict to occur can be quite high.

By far, the most common form of written communication mentioned by all my participants was through e-mails--computer mediated communication in networked environments. As a synthesis of text and conversational style, e-mail communication depends almost entirely on the contents of the text to create meaning. One participant described emails as "a whole system in itself of where people kind of informally write their own little words and stuff." In the engineering workplace, e-mails (or an internal form of MSN messenger) are used not only for trouble shooting and problem solving, but also for communicating company information and announcements, similar to the way memos were distributed before the technology was developed. They are in fact similar to individual turns in a face-to-face interaction. Li explained to me that most e-mails are very short messages. For example, he may receive an e-mail from a team member informing him that he or she is working at home today or leaving the office at 3 pm. Even an e-mail related to a project he is working on may simply state, "I am changing this part. You don't have to touch this part right now." And the response may be, "Okay, give me something to do." As a result, e-mail correspondences become more like informal conversational exchanges using written texts. Conciseness and brevity are emphasized; if an e-mail is considered to be too long in length, the likelihood of it being read in its entirety is very slim. "Some people write long paragraphs. I just don't read those kinds of e-mails ... two or three sentences, that's a paragraph and onto the next point."

Whether the e-mail is a quick conversational exchange or a brief memo, for the ESL speaker it has many advantages in terms of speed and convenience. In addition, "e-mailing people on technical matters gives you a record of what other people said, and that is often useful as a reference. ... It [also] gives me time to think." However, composing an e-mail can be a time-consuming activity. According to second language classroom research, computer-assisted conversation can be syntactically more complex and lexically more dense than face-to-face exchanges (Warschauer, 2001). Unlike in speaking where "communication is just the meaning you convey to the listener," on the screen, "all the mistakes are displayed there ... It can take a while ... to

organize the words" (Chen). Yuan confessed, "sometimes if I send a note to my manager, even just one word, he won't understand what I said." He described the process he went through checking spelling and grammar and learning new words every time he had sent an e-mail:

And when I use language to send notes, to send e-mail and before I send I will check my spelling, check my grammar and will find some... "he do that, not he does that" and "I did, or I am doing or something and she or he." And even this, very simple words, when I spell "scenario" I have to double check that cause it is quite difficult ... I spell that more than a hundred times. So I can remember that...

Li felt his typing could improve with practice but he concurred with Yuan about the difficulty he had with spelling, especially when he was using the company's internal instant messenger system, which was more like spontaneous conversation. He explained to me in an e-mail:

For spelling, I think it is really hard for me, many words I know how to pronounce, but don't know exactually the right spelling ... When I have this kind of situation, I normally try to avoid them and use similar words instead. If I can't get it, I will skip it and leave the wrong spelling word. I think they will understand and can guess because I don't have time to get the correct one ... And more, I don't have time to check the grammer things neither. I don't think too much about that, as long as they can understand. But I think there are many improper usages in the sentences I am writing.

He usually wrote short sentences, but if his questions or statements were long, Li's strategy was to type the sentence in WORD and copy and paste it to instant messenger, "and try not to let the other side wait too long." He was conscious of the fact that his native English speaking co-workers were able to compose their ideas and type faster than he could. He did point out, though, that if the message was too complicated, he would personally walk to his co-worker's desk instead of using the technology.

For ESL speakers, the messenger system is particularly challenging and developing strategies like copying and pasting text is an effective way to check for mistakes before posting responses. Writing e-mails is somewhat easier than conversational exchanges because participants have more time to respond and pull ideas together without being put on the spot. However, getting the spelling and grammar right is important to them. For ESL interns, their intuition tells them that they have to be really careful about what is in print. "Because it is a reflection on you, right ... I think it is really interesting that we can forgive quite a few native speakers when they make grammar mistakes when we think of not being able to forgive people coming from other countries." Although basic mechanics and vocabulary are items to which ESL speakers need to be attentive, they can be controlled to a certain extent with spell-and-grammar check or on-line dictionaries, which all ESL interns and co-op students acknowledged using for all their writing. A "forgiving" receiver at the other end is also greatly appreciated. ESL speakers do tend to compare themselves to the ideal-

ized native English speaker, which adds to their anxiety and frustration when they cannot respond as swiftly or express themselves as effectively as their peers who are corresponding in their first language.

## Pedagogical Implications

### Thematic or content-based pedagogy

Based on the results of the research, it becomes clear that ESL students require instruction in oral skills, primarily interpersonal communication, which includes computer mediated correspondence, and professional conversation in order to acquire linguistic and inter-cultural competence in a workplace setting. For example, a program which includes communicative and thematic or content-based pedagogy is effective in enhancing the learning of communication skills. According to Bynes (2005) there are benefits to developing an approach to curriculum that is based on genre-based pedagogical tasks with the integration of cultural content and language so that learners can acquire not only a comfortable competence but also a high level of cultural literacy. Content-based materials promote meaning instruction through activities that require ESL students to engage in, interact with, and synthesize information. They have the opportunity to work through tasks in teams to solve real problems, which helps them to engage in interactive communicative practices (Kasper, 2000).

The integration of engineering content and context into the curriculum should include tasks designed to reflect those that the students will need to perform as practicing engineers working in a highly oral environment. In real life, engineers are expected to present and justify solutions that are critically evaluated by people with vested interests. Case studies and scenarios provide students with problems in real-world communication that replicate their technical and professional roles, the audiences who read their writing, and necessary technical information. In solving problems, students should not only have the opportunity to write memos, letters, reports and e-mails to a variety of readers, but also to participate in meetings, solve problems in teams, and practice presentation skills. The task and the process of working through cases allow them to share their expertise through interpersonal communication. In addition, the various solutions may reveal a lot about how students interpret the problems, which may reflect a "cultural reading" of the situation. The process of analyzing cases, creating solutions and proposing recommendations provides students with roles they can recognize or identify with, and roles that involve their engineering knowledge.

Using case studies and scenarios requires a certain amount of planning and organizing on the part of the instructor. Engineering journals are invaluable sources of teaching materials because they include case studies of actual problems faced by industries. Students can also select their own topics or collect genuine data, which involves field research and the necessary communication between contacts.

Some ESL students may require extra instruction in order to improve their oral skills, depending on their previous educational, professional and personal experiences, and proficiency level in English. A non-credit course in academic and professional conversation skills in which ESL speakers have the opportunity to practice their oral English would be helpful. Through specific activities focusing on pronunciation, listening strategies and speaking skills, students can become more aware of conversational mechanics, such as body language and signals, signs of spontaneous speech, such as hesitation, rephrasing and repetition, and specific personal, cultural and professional influences that shape assumptions about effective interactions. Many ESL interns also mentioned the difficulties they had with word choices. As one trainer pointed out, "You wouldn't hear a truck driver say, oh what a darling hat ... Versus a housewife doesn't say I am going to open up this toaster to manipulate the resister. No, she is going to turn the dial to make it hot or cold." It is important for ESL students to understand why some expressions are appropriate to a given context while others are not; in other words, knowing your audience is essential to effective communication.

Because vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation can take years to develop, Freeman (2003) advises instructors to focus on learning strategies that will provide students with more immediate results, such as ways to initiate and maintain a conversation. She suggests providing students with "weekly takeaway conversational strategies" so that students can develop more confidence. Building confidence in their language skills increases the likelihood of them speaking English more often. Students who have particular pronunciation difficulties are advised to find a tutor who can help them on a one-to-one basis.

## Fostering Awareness of Intercultural Components of Communication

Language skills are important, but ineffectual if one has no understanding of how the language is used in socially appropriate ways to construct meaning in authentic cultural contexts. Culture learning should be a component of the ESP class. It can also occur on campus as a result of student participation in various extracurricular clubs and organizations, and off campus through active involvement in the local community. To understand and become immersed in a culture, we need to know in depth the values and meanings of its core symbols. Even human interest stories or literature from the classics that draw on daily life activities can acquaint students with typical issues that address family relationships, educational and other societal concerns. ESP courses that use newspaper and magazine articles, as prompts for discussion could be beneficial to students who would like to practice their oral skills and become more familiar with the "common topics" so necessary to initiating and maintaining conversation.

Indeed, reading articles that relate to popular culture, watching sit-coms on TV, analyzing videos on YouTube and engaging in recreational forms of conversation with native English speakers are some of the ways second language learners can try to make sense of the dynamic flow of discourse. Making sense of the flow also involves

understanding the interdependence of oral and written modes of communication. Different forms of media reveal a mixture and overlap of the forms and functions of speech and writing. From this perspective, it is important for ESL speakers to familiarize themselves with how people speak in various social contexts and how a variety of language events, such as business meetings and interviews, are handled in print. Listening to a news report on the radio or watching it on television provides practice in understanding spoken language that is based on written text.

In addition to university and recreational endeavors, the more opportunities ESL speakers have to go outside the university before entering their internship placements, the more they can observe and understand local culture firsthand, whether the context is in a hospital, public school, community centre or Toastmasters' club. It would also be useful for the student to have a native-English-speaking buddy with whom he or she could discuss cultural behaviours and language usage while participating in such activities. As knowledge is shared in these sorts of interactions, both parties achieve a greater understanding of each other's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And finally, ESL engineering students could also benefit from a living arrangement that is comprised of a mix of individuals, both ESL and native English speaking, or a host family to ensure that English is spoken at home and there are more chances for sharing and engaging in local customs. In that capacity, opportunities are available for newcomers to learn about Canadian cultural behaviour and form relationships with individuals outside their linguistic and cultural groups. Needless to say, the learning that takes place will remain at a superficial level unless everyone, ESL and native-English speakers, are not only attentive to but also reflective and *mindful* (Ting-Toomey, 1999) of cultural differences, and in the process of relationship building, develop the knowledge and skills to manage these differences constructively. Ideally students should be able to make their own informed judgments about what behaviours they need to incorporate in order to move freely within the culture with the least possible anxiety or sense of alienation.

## Conclusion

Factors that I believe influence the manner in which ESL interns acculturate to the workplace are not mutually exclusive; in fact they are all connected within a "layered" context, which is complex in--the "hybrid" milieu of the multicultural and multilingual setting. This is not to say that ESL interns do not struggle with their English; indeed, they were fully aware of the fact that they "needed more practice" and cultural knowledge because in their minds the ability to express oneself fluently in English is still a form of social and cultural capital, especially if it leads to their ultimate goal of full time professional employment. However, through a workplace experience, ESL interns practice and improve communication skills through interactive co-participation and collaboration among other English-speaking interns, co-workers and supervisors. From my participants' descriptions of the kinds of communication activities they performed, the difficulties they had, and the strategies they used for adapting, emerges a picture of an active environment in which oral and computer mediated communication among team players predominate working life.

It is through recognizing the complex link between language and culture inherent in situated communicative activity, in addition to the resourcefulness and resilience of those participating, that we can begin to develop programs at the university level that would better suit the needs and aspirations of ESL engineering interns.

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