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Researching powerful and powerless styles: Professional mock interviews in an English course

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Abstract

The study we present forms part of an ongoing study on the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in tertiary education. Our research aims at promoting the adequate use of workplace language by analysing the ability of non-native speakers of English to differentiate speech styles. Special attention has been devoted to the adequate use of powerful and powerless language in mock job interviews.

1. Introduction

Recent research on language teaching for the labour market has focused on successful participation in the workplace "to enhance the development not only of linguistic skills but also of generic skills, a challenge aimed at professional competitiveness and employability" (Montero-Fleta, 2012: 1812).

Newton and Kusmiersczyk (2011) classify this participation in the workplace into four trends:
1.   Studies that describe workplace discourses in particular settings;
2.   Research focused on interpersonal, informal communication, in contrast with traditional LSP studies which emphasize the technical, formal language of particular jobs or professions;
3.   Pedagogic approaches that prioritize awareness raising;
4.   Studies on the discursive requirements of the employment interview, focusing on the cases of migrants or ethnic minority candidates.

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Taking this classification into account, the study we propose addresses the discursive requirements of the employment interview with a focus not on migrant or ethnic minorities but on specific jobs or professions. Furthermore, the project carried out is closely related to the new literacy demands of the workplace in relation to the field of our students, that of Information Management. Concerning the trends appointed by Newton and Kusmiersczyk (2011), our research would then be connected to approaches number 2 and number 4.

2. Purpose of the study: Powerful and powerless language

The objectives of this study are twofold. On the one hand, to work on the implications of the directives of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in our daily teaching practice, as suggested by Pérez-Sabater (2012) and, on the other hand, to see to the rhetorical devices that pose problems in language learning according to scholars such as Hyland (1998). The CEFR is the compendium of guidelines currently adopted in European language learning environments that describes the competences necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills, and the situations and domains of communication. As for the learning of sociocultural knowledge, the CEFR recommends the dedication of special attention to some aspects of a particular European society and its culture, which may involve the study of relations in work situations.

Regarding rhetorical devices needed to be addressed in language learning, the proficient use of discourse markers is a must. Non native speakers of a language have difficulties in achieving an appropriate use of language varieties, as, e.g., the command of powerful and powerless styles. In general, powerless style consists in the use of what Fraser (1980) calls mitigating devices, such as indirectness, distancing techniques or disclaimers, among others. Scholars such as Fraser (1980), Bradac and Mulac (1984), and Fragale (2006) have put forward the linguistic markers that supply moderation and attenuation to speech and characterize powerless style. The relative absence of these markers will indicate a powerful style, which exhibits a small number of the markers that characterize powerless styles and is more direct, categorical and assertive.

Table 1 summarizes the main features of both language varieties:

Table 1. Powerful vs. Powerless style

Powerful	Powerless
• assertive	• tentative
• dominant	• hesitant
• persuasive	• moderate
• credible	
• certain	
• categorical	

Generally, the linguistic markers that are present in powerless styles are hedges/validity qualifiers, tag questions, intensifiers, hesitations and word repetitions, among others. The appropriate command of this pragmatic competence is very difficult to acquire by non native speakers of a language and that is why it needs to be dealt with in the language classroom (Hyland, 1998).

In this context, our research focuses on building students' awareness of powerful versus powerless styles in a specific context of job interviews. The study is carried out with non-native speakers of English in a degree of Library and Information Management in a subject calibrated according to the CEFR, a specific learning environment that needs to be addressed by the academic community at the moment (Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2012).

3. The Interview Project: Learning context and approach

The subjects of the present research were 30 students of English over the course of a semester in a university setting. The average age of the students was 21.6 and their level of English was intermediate, (B1) according to the CEFR. Classes met 3 hours a week. The objective of the course was, on the one hand, to develop fluency, accuracy,

quality and correctness in written language; but on the other hand, the innovative side of the empirical study proposed was to look beyond these linguistic outcomes in the English language syllabus and pursue the acquisition of professional skills oriented towards the development of students' professional competence and employability (see Montero-Fleta, 2012).

New approaches in language learning posit that English requirements are no longer based on proficiency only, other skills such as sociopragmatic competences, flexibility, and ability to communicate in different settings should also be cater for (Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011). Specifically, the sociopragmatic dimension of talk is particularly challenging for non-native speakers of the language (Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011). Bearing these learning requirements in mind, we devised a job interview practice to be introduced in the English class.

The Interview Project we present was run based on the students' design of a mock interview where a position for a professional of the field Library and Information Management was sought. Two stages of the project were devised. The first stage aimed at helping students achieve awareness of language variation with special regard to the difference between powerful and powerless styles. A second stage aimed at the use of these styles appropriately in a written mock interview to prepare learners for similar situations in their workplace in the future.

Stage 1. Preparation

The concept of powerful vs. powerless language was introduced in a lesson. Students required specific guidance to distinguish these linguistic varieties and the markers associated with them. To this end, text-fragments were selected for in-class examination following Fragale (2006). Students were provided with some examples of the linguisitic markers of powerless language (see Appendix 1). The following tasks were carried out in class based on the text-fragments selected:

- Students were asked to compare two versions of a text, with and without powerless markers.
- Powerless markers were identified.
- Markers were then removed and its effect on the meaning of the text was discussed to find out the circumstances under which they can be employed.

Stage 2. Interview project

(i) Activity based on pairwork: Two students with different roles in the interview.

(ii) Roles (as assigned to students):

- *Interviewer*: You are interviewing a candidate for the position of **** at ****. You want to appear to the interviewee as an authoritative person. You want to give the impression that you are confident and on top of things. You are determined to find someone for the job who is creative, innovative and ambitious. The interview must be closely related to the job position advertised
- *Interviewee*: You are being interviewed, include powerless markers in the written interview.

(iii) Tasks and writing assignment (as assigned to students)

Find an advertisement on the Internet requiring a professional of your field.

   Design the interview following the structure:

- Opening (Some small talk).
- Main interview (Information on job and company, Information on candidate following a CV).
- Closing (Information regarding administrative details, answers to the candidate's questions).

In our opinion, apart from linguistic competence, the command of some specific strategies of linguistic and communicative nature will make students be more fluent in a job interview. As argued by Lin et al. (2012), if students are made aware of the characteristics of real speech which imply repetitions, backchannels and pauses, then they will also be able to use some of these strategies to communicate more effectively.

4. Assessment

Assessment was based on the structure of the interview, the language used, i.e., correct grammar and vocabulary and the incorporation of the linguistic markers studied. The interviews were analyzed and discussed in class to raise students' awareness of the use of the discourse markers studied. To obtain data for the study on powerful vs.

powerless styles, characteristic linguistic markers were identified and statistically studied. The appropriateness of the interview to the requirements of the job vacancy advertised was also a part of their final evaluation.

5. Discusion and conclusions

Putting this learning activity into practice has raised some interesting issues. The most important finding drawn from this authentic learning experience is that students were not able to perform properly according to the assigned role. The difference of power between interlocutors was not often present in their texts as required. For example, on the one hand, interviewers who had to adopt powerful style sometimes used many of the linguistic markers that characterize powerless varieties, such as hedging or hesitations. On the other hand, although students performing the interviewee's role found it quite straightforward to incorporate powerless markers in the writing assignments with the knowledge acquired in the preparation phase, they were not so successful in the representation of power in the role of the interviewer, as powerful speech was not observed in the interviewer's discourse. Sometimes, the abundant number of hedges and hesitations used made the interviewer's role sound as powerless as the one used by the interviewee. The reason for this inappropriate use of rhetorical choices may be due to the problems of role play between classmates and those involved in request speech acts. Frequently, interviewers found it difficult to act in an assertive, dominant or persuasive way with a classmate. In this regard, Yates and Springall (2010) posit that requests are risky to perform as they involve a wide variety of mitigating strategies. The "risky performance", in our case, may pose even more problems, as the participants involved are classmates who may sound too authoritative and imposing to their colleagues. Despite these drawbacks, the students' feedback on the assignment was very positive: for most of them the task was a motivating and useful learning activity, as it has prepared them for a future job interview in English.

On the whole, the present project has contributed to enhance employability skills, interpersonal communication, and critical language awareness in line with the directives of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, the experience carried out has underlined that, although powerless markers have been incorporated to the written interviews, further practice is still needed to internalize their conventions of use in English, mainly because our students need more time and practice to acquire the pragmatic competence required for successful communication in a professional environment.

Further studies will complement the present project and will devise an integrated approach of the use of the discourse markers in written and spoken interactions comparatively. The use of powerful and powerless markers will be studied in spoken deliveries of the interview with the same students as subjects. The effectiveness of these markers, i.e., the occasions when powerful or powerless language is particularly effective may also be the objective of further research. Gender differences in the use of language varieties in specialized learning contexts could also be addressed, as tentative outcomes have been suggested in recent studies according to male and female use of powerless language.

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Appendix 1.

Powerless markers		
Hedges	-	*sort of, kind of,*
	-	*you know, possibly, probably, perhaps, a little, the thing is, usually, whatever, in general, to some extent,*
	-	*somewhat, almost describable as, some, a little bit,*
	-	*presumably, apparently, basically, as far as I know, as far as I'm concerned*
	-	*according to,*
	-	*it could be that, it may work,*
	-	*and so on, in a way, or something like that, more or less, etcetera, in a sense, and things like that, or whatever, so to say, and so forth, somewhat, and everything,*
Tag questions	-	*isn't it, won't you? can't you? ok?*
	-	*right?*
	-	*don't you think? wouldn't you agree?*
Intensifiers	-	*he really did, very, so,*
	-	*that was the greatest most interesting experience I have ever had,*
	-	*this is exactly what I mean,*
	-	*I certainly do insist,*
Hesitations	-	*well, um, ah, uh, aww, uhhh,*
	-	*I, um, don't know, ah,*
Formal addresses and polite forms	-	*yes sir, thank you,*
	-	*would you please...?*
	-	*would you be so kind as to ...?*
	-	*I'd really appreciate it if ...,*
	-	*excuse me please, Sir,*
Deictic pronouns	-	*that man over there,*
	-	*this is what I mean,*
	-	*this is the question,*
Distancing techniques: Passive instead of active	-	*e.g. many applicants were dismissed,*
Disclaimers	-	*if I am not wrong, I hate to do this, I don't really know, I really shouldn't say this ...*
	-	*I am not an expert, but ...,*
	-	*I would like to get involved ... but,*
	-	*please correct me if I'm wrong ...*
Parenthetical verbs	-	*I believe, I assume, I guess, it would appear that...,*
	-	*I think, I suppose, I reckon, I feel that..., I mean,*
Personalised epistemic modals	-	*it seems to me, it seems that ...,*
	-	*it looks like.*