Examining language socialization in the workplace: How university graduates learn to use English for workplace communication

What this research was about and why it is important

Despite the large number of university graduates who use English as a second language at work, little is known about the process they go through in learning to use it to communicate for work-related purposes. The present study addresses this gap by investigating how three Hong Kong graduates learned to use English for work and how they overcame their communication challenges in an unfamiliar field. The study has implications for language educators who want to help university students be better prepared for workplace communication in English after they graduate.

What the researcher did

- An analytical framework entailing three key elements was developed to guide the data analysis. The elements are 1) communities of practice, 2) the learning of workplace genres, and 3) professional identity.
- A multi-case study was conducted. It involved three graduates (pseudonyms: Ellie, Jenny, Mandy) who had recently graduated from a degree programme in English studies and had recently begun to work in a field new to them. (Ellie and Mandy worked in Hong Kong; Jenny worked in Singapore.)
- Data were collected mainly through a one-to-one interview with each informant. A questionnaire and an online form for the informants to record their recent experiences were used to collect data before the interviews.

What the researcher found

- Through working on workplace tasks, all three informants discovered the gaps in their knowledge and skills.
- All three informants encountered difficulties with non-specialist workplace genres, e.g., Ellie with minutes of meetings; Jenny with socializing and networking at conferences; Mandy with emails and reports.
- Although the difficult genres were generally not considered to be technical or specialist genres, a major source of the informants’ difficulty was their lack of knowledge of their field (e.g., the jargon of the field and its professional practices). For example, Ellie found it challenging to write minutes for meetings where her engineering colleagues had used certain technical terms in English that she was unfamiliar with.
- Another source of difficulty was the informants’ inadequate level of English proficiency, in particular their lack of general vocabulary, which can be seen from their self-reported inability to use varied and precise language and to understand some of the non-technical words/phrases used by their colleagues.
- The workplace provided many opportunities for the informants to learn workplace communication informally. Common ways of learning included learning from past documents that served as templates, learning from colleagues’ input, observing colleagues’ use of language and googling unfamiliar terms.
- The informants saw English proficiency as an indicator of their professional identity, which made them concerned about revealing their weaknesses in English and caused them to shun some possibly more effective ways of overcoming communication challenges, such as seeking help from their colleagues and supervisors, for fear that others might consider their English poor and see them as incompetent.
- In workplaces where a language other than English is also used, graduates may face some unique challenges. For example, Ellie was unable to learn how some English technical terms should be used in English sentences, because the terms were heard within Cantonese utterances; in informal discussions, Jenny sometimes switched from English to Mandarin when her English failed her, which reduced her opportunities to practise English.

Things to consider

- Since graduates need to have some grasp of the technical knowledge of the field and its professional practices in order to handle workplace tasks and genres effectively, universities should seek to develop students’ ability to handle tasks and genres in different fields. This is especially important for students taking non-practice-based degree programmes, who may enter a variety of fields after graduation.
- Because graduates’ insecurities about their proficiency can inhibit their workplace learning, universities should help non-native-English-speaking students to develop their general English proficiency, in addition to helping them with English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP).
- Language educators in higher education should give students help with ways of learning language in workplace settings (as opposed to academic, instructional settings) that they can apply in their future careers.
- Language educators should be more aware of the additional challenges that graduates working in bilingual/multilingual workplaces may face and find ways to better prepare students for these challenges.

Data, materials, open access article: N/A


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