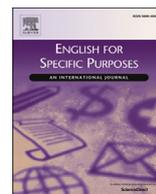


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English as a lingua franca communication between domestic helpers and employers in Hong Kong: A study of pragmatic strategies



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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an exploratory, small-scale study that investigated the use of English as a lingua franca in domestic workplaces in Hong Kong between Filipino employees and Hong Kongese employers. Through data collected from surveys of and interviews with employers and employees, the study explored the characteristics of the pragmatic features of communication, and identified the challenges experienced by participants and the pragmatic strategies that they used to communicate. In general, it was found that what can be defined as active strategies, such as clarification, repetition and direct questioning, were more successful in achieving effective communication from a transactional perspective, while passive strategies, such as ignoring unknown language produced by an interlocutor in the expectation that it would either become clear or redundant, were more likely to lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding. The study also found that pragmatic competence was viewed as being more important than language 'proficiency' as it has traditionally been conceived. The article concludes that there may be a need for critical reflection on the ESP courses that are currently provided in the Hong Kong context.

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1. Background

Hong Kong has a population of over seven million people, more than a quarter of a million of whom are foreign domestic helpers who contribute over HK\$13.7 billion annually to the economy ([Asian Migrant Centre, 2004](#)). These migrant workers play a crucial role in the daily life of Hong Kong families, with live-in domestic staff undertaking housework, caring for the elderly and assisting with child-rearing ([Chia, 2012](#)). The numbers have grown since the 1970s, when more Hong Kong Chinese women started to complete higher education and enter the paid labour market ([French, 1986](#); [Holroyd, Molassiotis, & Taylor-Pilliaie, 2008](#)). Over the same period, the Philippines has experienced economic instability and high unemployment rates, leading to a rise in migration to neighbouring wealthy areas ([Hawwa, 2000](#)), including Hong Kong. As a consequence, Filipinos form the largest national group in the domestic sector and are the largest non-Chinese group in the territory, comprising 70% of the total. This compares with 25% for Indonesians and 3% for Thais, the two next highest national groups ([Bell, 2000](#); [Chia, 2012](#); [Chiu & Asian Migrant Centre, 2004](#)).

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Filipinos who undertake domestic service have been considered in the past a particular asset, it has been argued, because of their competence in English (Crebo, 2003; Jernudd, 1995; Lan, 2013), particularly as they have sometimes taken on the role of English tutor to their employers' children (Bolton, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2007). However, in Hong Kong recently a number of domestic disputes have been reported in the media, aggravated, it is claimed, not only because of the limited amount of training and migrant support available, but also because newer migrants may lack the desired level of English language competence (Chen, 2013). Given the very large numbers of Filipinos engaged in domestic work in Hong Kong and the reports of language-related tensions, it is surprising that so little research has been published from the perspective of language and communication. While there are many studies that have examined the experience of the Filipina domestic worker from a sociological perspective (e.g. Chang & Ling, 2003; Constable, 2007; Ladegaard, 2012; Law, 2001), there is very little in the scholarly literature that has examined interaction in English, except in general observations about employment and English capabilities, as identified above. The study reported in this paper attempted to address this lacuna by identifying some of the features of pragmatic interaction between Hong Kong employers and Filipino employees and establish the extent to which those features might facilitate or inhibit successful communication. The specific questions which the study sought to address were therefore: 'What are the pragmatic features of verbal interaction between Hong Kong national employers and Filipino employees in the context of the domestic workplace in Hong Kong?' and 'In what ways, if any, do the pragmatic features identified facilitate or inhibit successful communication between employer and employee in this context?' For the purposes of the study, 'successful communication' was defined as the management of communication so that it achieved an intended interactional goal (Nakatani, 2005, cited in Kubota, 2013).

2. The communicative context

The Philippines is one of the largest English speaking countries in the world (Thompson, 2003). English is the second language of the Philippines, where a bilingual education policy of English and Tagalog was adopted for the almost 50 years of American rule (Jenkins, 2003). Although Tagalog is the national lingua franca, English is used as the language of business, higher education and wider cross-cultural communication (Jenkins, 2003; Thompson, 2003), and a specific variety, Philippine English, has been extensively documented (Kirkpatrick, 2007; McArthur, 2002). Hong Kong, too, was under colonial rule for 155 years, and has developed its own variety of English, heavily influenced by Cantonese (Cummings & Wolf, 2011; Hung, 2002; Setter, Wong, & Chan, 2010). According to Bolton (2002), Hong Kong English is used among local people who are from lower-middle class and working-class families with little chance to speak English apart from the bilingual education setting. Both these varieties of English are distinct in terms of phonology, lexis and grammar and cultural development.

While these two varieties exist, and the differences between them are likely to play a role in any cross-cultural encounters that take place in English, English is not a first language (L1) for many employers and employees in the context discussed in this paper, but is used as a lingua franca. English as a lingua franca can be defined as 'any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option' (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). In an English as a lingua franca environment, it has been argued, the key goals are intelligibility and intercultural communication, and the processes by which these are achieved are adaptation and accommodation (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011).

In such English as a lingua franca contexts, it has been found that communicative effectiveness is the overarching requirement for successful communication (Björkman, 2010), and competent users make use of a number of pragmatic strategies in interactive talk (Firth, 1996). Lo Castro (2003, p. 7) defines pragmatic competence as 'the ability to use language to carry out everyday functions in culturally appropriate ways'. Hence scholars have indicated the importance of pragmatics in an international context, and have often emphasized the importance of pragmatic and communicative competence in language interaction (Gumperz, 2001). Firth's (1996) study found that there were two clear goals for such lingua franca contexts: to pursue agreed goals through the interaction and to create the appearance of ordinariness with the conversation in spite of its uncommon linguistic content. The strategies used to achieve this include, for example, a 'let it pass' strategy, adopted by listeners who, when facing an unrecognised word or phrase, ignore it on the basis that the meaning will either become clear or redundant; and the 'make it normal' strategy, where the hearer focuses on the content of their interlocutor's talk rather than linguistic issues and attempts to produce reformulations of their interlocutor's language. Thus the emphasis appears to be on achieving consensus, cooperation and mutual support (Canagarajah, 2007). Other research has found that successful communication involves preventing misunderstanding from happening through self-repairs, clarifications and repetitions; or, if misunderstandings occur, that they are redressed by direct questions, identification of problem items and indirect signals of misunderstanding (Cogo & Dewey, 2006; Mauranen, 2006).

In the context of the study reported in this paper, there are additional complexities involved. Domestic service reinforces social differences, and as has been argued one might expect to see this reflected through English as a lingua franca communication between Hong Kong employers and their Filipino domestic workers, where 'discourse dominance by the employers can be expected' (Fan, 2015, p. 89). At the same time, English might also be used as a tool for resistance by workers, where there is a proficiency difference, as one study on Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan found (Lan, 2013), with employees deliberately using complex vocabulary or correcting their employer's grammar (Lan, 2013, p. 155). This suggests that the pragmatic strategies that have been described within the literature for English as a lingua franca contexts may be subjected to contextual factors that distort the cooperative goals that have been identified within that paradigm and thereby

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