

# Hindered Competence: How Interlocutors Inhibit Workplace Communication

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# The Okanagan and Halifax Regions

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[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/aa/Halifax\\_Canada\\_Day\\_2007.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/aa/Halifax_Canada_Day_2007.jpg)



## Research Question

How do interlocutors negatively impact the manifestation of communicative competence in the workplace?



# Your Thoughts ...

What behaviours or actions on the part of customers/co-workers might inhibit newcomers' communicative competence?



# Theoretical Framework

- The study is contextualized within:
  - Additional language socialization understanding of language acquisition
- Exploring the process, in relation to community, by which newcomers develop:
  - Communicative competence in English
  - Community membership
  - Perceived legitimacy
- Participation in the community is an important part of the learning process

(Duff, 2007; Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)



# Background

- Canada has a rich and diverse linguistic makeup, with newcomers from a variety of language backgrounds
- Vast majority of newcomers can carry out conversations in English or French  
(Statistics Canada, 2017a)
- However, many newcomers face communication challenges in the workplace, with the responsibility being placed on them for lacking required English levels (Kang, Rubin, & Lindeman, 2015; Subtirelu & Lindeman, 2016)

# Conceptualizing Communicative Competence

- More than just grammar (Hymes, 1966; 1972)
- Includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, & strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980)
- Plus Discourse competence: creating unified messages (Canale, 1983)
- Plus Actional competence: how to engage (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995)
- Plus Formulaic competence: prefabricated fixed chunks of language (Celce-Murcia, 2007)

# Communicative Competence = Language Ability

(Bachman & Palmer, 2010)

Language Knowledge	textual organization, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and phonology
Pragmatic Knowledge	cultural references, idiomatic language, registers, dialects, genre, sharing feelings and ideas, getting others to do or stop doing something, solving problems and learning, and using language for aesthetic or humorous purposes
Strategic Knowledge	planning, assessing, evaluating, goal setting, and managing language use



# The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)

- National standard for describing additional language ability in English across 12 levels of proficiency from basic to advanced
- Descriptors for speaking, listening, reading, and writing at each level
- Language users may be at different benchmark levels in different skills
- Theoretical framework based on Bachman and Palmer's (2010) conceptualization of language ability

(Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012)



# The CELPIP-General LS Test

- Calibrated against the CLB (CELPIP levels and CLB levels are the same)
- Assesses listening and speaking proficiency in English
- Listening to news, speaking with friends, and interacting with others at work
- Scores in listening and speaking are provided as CELPIP levels.
- Proof of listening and speaking proficiency for Canadian citizenship

(Paragon Testing Enterprises, 2017)

# Previous Studies: Challenges for EAL Speakers at Work

- Conventions of workplace communication (Derwing & Munro, 2009)
- Social interaction and small talk (Dahm & Yates, 2013; Holmes, 2000)
- Negative opinions of EAL speakers (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015)
- Perceived otherness of EAL speakers (Kachru, 1995; Lindemann, 2002)
- Encounters with ignorance, prejudice, and superiority (Gardner & Liu, 2010)
- Criticized or ridiculed speech of EAL speakers (Gardner and Liu, 2010; Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015)
- Feelings of distrust, misunderstanding, and tension (Gerdes & Wilberschied, 2003)



# The Study: Okanagan Participants

Participant	Gender Identity	Age	Years in Canada	Country of Origin	Language	Canadian Work Experience	CELP Listening	CELP Speaking
Beatrice	Female	45-50	4	Cameroon	French	Server and host in the food services department and restaurant of a large hotel	7	8
Juan	Male	25-30	2	Mexico	Spanish	General worker in a vineyard and part-time clerk in a photography shop	7	6
Lauren	Female	30-35	3	Mexico	Spanish	Clerk in an organic grocery and health food store	6	6
Michelle	Female	20-25	5	Philippines	Tagalog	Office assistant providing client support and customer service	11	7
Jason	Male	35-40	1	Tunisia	Arabic	Research assistant in a scientific field	10	6
Shelby	Female	35-40	6	South Korea	Korean	Temporary on-call office assistant	7	5

# The Study: Halifax Participants

Participant	Gender Identity	Years in Canada	Country of Origin	Language	Canadian Work Experience	CELP Listening	CELP Speaking
Melissa	Female	1	Russia	Russian, Hebrew	Data Entry	7	6
Alison	Female	2	Uruguay	Spanish	Food service in a Hotel	3	6
Jackson	Male	1	Sudan	Massalit, Twi	Janitor	3	5
Jane	Female	3	Uganda	Kiganda	Hotel Receptionist	3	4
Khaled	Male	3	Sudan	Arabic	Dishwasher	3	3



# Data Collection

Two semi-structured interviews (each approximately 30 minutes)

- Interview 1:
  - Background Information
- Interview 2:
  - Opportunity to share stories of using English in the workplace

# Data Analysis

- Qualitative approach to data collection and analysis
- Identified anecdotes (short narratives of specific incidents or events of an illustrative nature related to using English in the workplace)
- Coded and categorized salient data in the anecdotes
- Identified emerging thematic patterns related to how interlocutors may impact the communicative competence of the participants in the workplace

# Results: Factors Inhibiting Workplace Communication

Affective Tension	Interlocutor Language Use	Interlocutor Comprehension	Time Pressure	Participant Perceptions
Anger and annoyance	Fast-paced speech	Perceived accents	Pressure to speak quickly	Perceived identity
Stress and discomfort	Vocabulary	Explanations and details	Preparation	Inability to ask questions
Interlocutor insensitivity	Unexpected interactions		Information overload	

# Affective Tension: Anger & Annoyance

Michelle (Okanagan)

- “**he was pretty angry, and he was just shouting on the phone**, which was ... not good. I couldn’t really understand him fully ... because he was mad, and it was phone. **I couldn’t really understand....** [the client was] mad and then shouting at the same time, and then I was, and then you’re really frustrated at the same time as well....”

# Affective Tension: Stress and Discomfort

Shelby (Okanagan)

- “she [her co-worker] came to me upset, then whoa, it’s too much things all of a sudden.... It was so much stress, so my fault is, when I get stressed I can’t speak well. Even in Korean.... I was kind of, you know, blinking my eyes, and I, my heart was beating really fast for four hours. I was really upset and I wasn’t very happy, and I wanted to say something.... **Every time I have to speak to someone in English, because I am upset and I’m not happy, my sentence was terrible.** Totally terrible because there is a thing, real thing I want to say but I have to overcome and bring up really good mood ... very challenging.”



# Interlocutor Language Use: Interlocutor Insensitivity

Alison (Halifax Region)

- “I was working with my supervisor and other partner come to the kitchen and he need to work in my microwave, for example, and I saw he, he has a very big tattoo here, and I say oh, you have a tattoo. ‘Yes, I have one here and I have two more’ and my supervisor start to talking with, with him about the tattoo and I mean it, I say okay, **I need only listen....**”

# Interlocutor Language Use: Fast-paced Speech

Khaled (Halifax Region)

- **“It’s be like surprise when you working, say go on upstairs, take some dishes,** you are, you mumble meaning the dishes but floor, but you say what floor, because they have two floors. You go and ask quickly, what floor, one or two? And he say, go two, and then you go in two. If he say just go in my office, take the dishes, you don’t know the kitchen and you know the office, you’re going to take. If you don’t know, I’m going to ask you. Sometime I work and I have, I see something that I tell him, what’s his name, somebody needs to take something next to me, they.... And continue, you ask.”

# Interlocutor Language Use: Vocabulary

Shelby (Okanagan)

- Shelby was challenged by some of the acronyms used by her colleagues at work. She said, “They use omitted word [acronyms]. **These words that I can’t understand.** They all, already, they also think, oh, Shelby is going to know this word, right? I have no idea.” Shelby gave an example, “...lots of omitted words [acronyms] like EI, not employ insurance, just EI.”

# Interlocutor Language Use: Unexpected Interactions

Melissa (Halifax Region)

- “It was almost every day though they started to speak between them, and they Canadian, so for me it was very difficult to understand what they speak about and **I felt very difficult to start, to interrupt to the conversation**, you know, because they spoke not about the job but everything about the TV shows, about hockey or you know, really I felt that I, I don’t understand anything.”



# Interlocutor Comprehension: Perceived Accents

Beatrice (Okanagan)

- “...there is one of my colleagues, host like me, who struggle to get me. So she’s not, she doesn’t get me. I don’t know why. She’s Canadian. I don’t know what happened, but she really struggled to get me. I have to repeat myself and repeat.” Beatrice said she also had another co-worker, “We are friends, but she doesn’t, **she’s always saying ‘pardon me?’ So I have to repeat myself and repeat again.**”



# Interlocutor Comprehension: Explanations and Details

Juan (Okanagan)

- “Sometimes, when you try to explain very specifically, sometimes you have problems or when you try to put together two ideas to want to explain, sometimes it’s hard. It’s difficult, not too hard, but a little bit difficult.”  
Sometimes customers didn’t understand the specialized vocabulary used in the photography shop: **“The people just want a nice picture and that’s it. Really don’t care about the terms.”** As a result, he could not really use the specialized language he knew about photography to help him explain things to customers.

# Time Pressure: Trying to Speak Quickly

Lauren (Okanagan)

- “Sometimes the people arrive with a **short bit of time**. I mean they just are walking and doing things pretty fast, and they don’t have time for a lot of explanation about things, and they just say yes or no.” As a result, Lauren felt it was “...harder to convince somebody when they don’t have the time to listen.”



# Time Pressure: Preparation

Michelle (Okanagan)

- “... he [a client shouting on the phone] didn’t really give me any time to say anything back, so I was just like, okay, and then before **I could even think of anything that’s, to say back to him, he already hung up the phone.**”

# Time Pressure: Information Overload

Shelby (Okanagan)

- “They [new employee trainers] have orientation, and they prepare the presentation right. Showed us, okay, when [client] ask you this, and go this website and this page and, you know.” The issue for Shelby was that it was “... **a lot of information in one time and at same time.**”

# Participant Perceptions: Perceived Identity

Michelle (Okanagan)

- Michelle: “When I’m talking with strangers [I don’t always feel confident]. Maybe I’m afraid because whenever I see strangers, maybe **they also think things like I’m not really a white girl, right? They’ll think like ‘Oh, she can’t speak English well’....**” According to Michelle, because some clients did not see her as a “white girl ... they try to tone down their English too, and that makes me feel insecure, until like I can’t speak English.”



# Participant Perceptions: Others Openness to Questions

Shelby (Okanagan)

- Shelby: “I couldn’t ask someone because it seems everyone are busy, so I just sit down there like, ‘Oh my goodness, what I’m doing here?’ ...**I can’t keep asking them, you know, ‘Well, what’s that? What’s that word? What? What’s that?’** ...You know for example, [workplace acronym].... Who knows [workplace acronym]? ... and for example, EI, as well right, that’s employ insurance, right? If they talking about EI, EI? Or E, I, or what that? You know?” In these types of situations, Shelby wondered whether she had the right to ask questions: “I have to catch what’s that EI, and I write down memo and then ask [myself] whether [I] can ask.”

# Discussion: Language Ability is Impacted by Interlocutors

- Workplace communication challenges are more complicated than simply a need for the participants to gain more English language skills.
- Participants' ability to muster the full range of their communicative competence was impacted by their interlocutors.
- Affective tension, lack of consideration, defaulted responsibility for making meaning, time pressure, and feelings of otherness negatively affected workplace communication.

# Discussion: Conceptualizing Communicative Competence

- Opportunity to expand the descriptions of communicative competence which currently inform the CLB (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Bachman & Palmer, 2010)
- Interlocutor actions and attitudes (real or imagined) can impede the ability to demonstrate the full range of a speaker's communicative competence
- Individuals may be assessed as having a particular CLB level, but external factors may preclude those levels from manifesting in certain situations
- What speakers can do in an additional language has to be understood within a wider consideration of the impact of external factors, such as interlocutors

# Discussion: Lack of Awareness and/or Responsibility

- From the point of view of the participants, it appeared that interlocutors were not always aware that their actions might negatively impact communication.
- Interlocutors didn't always seem to think it was their responsibility to foster successful communication.
- Interlocutors from English speaking backgrounds do not typically expect, or perhaps even want, to adjust to the language of newcomers from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015)

# Discussion: Negativity Towards Newcomers from LDB

- Beatrice had angry customers on the phone, demanding to know where she was from, requesting someone else, and telling her she did not know English.
- Shelby felt there was no one she could ask for help, and everyone was judging her as an “uneducated” person, despite having a university education and not having received the support she needed to carry out her job effectively
- Negative opinions can lead to communication challenges (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015; Lindemann, Litzenberg, & Subtirelu, 2014), and a questioning of the right to work (Gardner & Liu, 2010; McAll, 2013)
- Isolation can result in people feeling they lack safe and supportive environments for communication (Gerdes and Wilberschied, 2003)

# Implications for Newcomers

- Need for professional development opportunities that focus on developing strategic knowledge for dealing with:
  - high levels of affective tension
  - unsympathetic interlocutors
  - Linguicism
  - Racism
  - time pressure
  - feelings of otherness and isolation

# Implications for Interlocutors

- Support for interlocutors to facilitate communication in the workplace
- Work on changing possible negative attitudes and general lack of empathy
- Develop awareness of the potential struggles newcomers face
- Direct instruction on listening to accented speech (Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro, 2002)
- Awareness raising activities (Derwing & Waugh, 2012)
- increased contact between groups and promoting understanding of others' situations (Subtirelu & Lindemann, 2016)



# Limitations and Future Studies

- Findings may not be the same in other locations with other people
- Anecdotes only present the point of view of the participants
- Future studies could include the interlocutors
- Future studies could look at how interlocutors might facilitate communication
- Future studies could employ further data collection methods, such as workplace observations, journalling, and focus groups



# Conclusions

- Anecdotes are windows into communicative experiences in the workplace.
- English language ability does not always fully express itself when negatively impacted by interlocutors in the workplace.
- Just as newcomers have workplace language instruction and training, similar programs for their interlocutors could also be beneficial.
- Time to move responsibility for communication away from the sole responsibility of newcomers to becoming a joint endeavour shared by all.

# Questions and Comments? Let's Talk!

## Thank you!

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