Involving company representatives in helping university learners to develop sociopragmatic competence in English for job interviews

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Abstract
Graduates in the Vietnamese context seeking to enter the globalized workplace, where they will need to use English for business purposes in culturally appropriate ways, may be hindered not only by limited English proficiency in general, but also specifically by limited sociopragmatic competence. Sociopragmatic competence is really needed by candidates in job interviews in Vietnam and elsewhere when they present themselves positively at the beginning of the interview, engage in relational and transactional talk throughout, and answer interviewers' questions at the end. Of the various strategies that may be employed at the university to support the development of such competence, one would be to involve local company representatives in helping English language teachers to prepare their students by simulating job interviews. This study reports on such an intervention in Vietnam. Drawing on observational data collected through notes and audio-recordings, the study provides insights into how the intervention utilized strategies that had the potential to enhance the employability of Vietnamese graduates. The study suggests that the real world expertise and professional guidance provided by company representatives could be utilized elsewhere in ways such as documented here to support teachers and university curriculum developers in designing teaching materials and tasks. Such partnerships between local companies and language teachers are likely to benefit learners needing to acquire sociopragmatic competence to be successful in situations such as job interviews.

Key words: simulated job interviews; communicative competence; sociopragmatic competence; relational and transactional talk; industry-led curriculum; Vietnamese graduates.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization nowadays, in Vietnam, as in many other countries, businesses require of their employees sufficient language competence to enable them to speak and write in English for business purposes in culturally appropriate ways (Gatehouse, 2001; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991). The first test of the language competence of employees aiming to enter the workplace is the job interview. Language competence in this situation includes not only an ability to communicate effectively in English drawing upon grammatical, textual, functional and sociolinguistic knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), but also sociopragmatic competence (Leech, 1983). Leech coined this term to emphasize that speakers need to consider very specific, local expectations regarding language use when engaging in conversational behavior. Sociopragmatic competence, which involves being able to employ socially- and contextually-appropriate linguistic rules in a particular situation as required (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017), is vital in the context of job interviews and can be challenged when candidates feel under pressure. An inappropriately formulated speech act, for example, could damage the chances of a candidate highly conscious of needing to present themselves positively and answer questions successfully, in the eyes of their interlocutors (Powell & Generoso, 2012). Sociopragmatic competence, then, involves meeting "expectations about interactional discourse held by members of a speech community as appropriate and 'normal' behavior" (LoCastro, 2012, p. 159). Unfortunately, however, graduates in the Vietnamese context may tend to have limited sociopragmatic competence in English (Vo, 2015; Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, 2018). Research findings in this and other contexts (Vo, 2015; Vo, Wyatt & McCullagh, 2016; Iva & Eliska, 2016) show that the requirements for sociopragmatic English use in the workplace tend to far outstrip the competence of university graduates. Graduates in this Vietnamese context are thus likely to struggle in job interviews.

The gap previously identified between the demands of workplace communication in English and the linguistic competence of Vietnamese graduates (e.g., Vo et al., 2016) suggests that students need to be better prepared at university to use appropriate communication strategies and develop a sufficient level of sociopragmatic competence. This sociopragmatic competence is necessary, not just for workplace interaction, but also to negotiate the first step, the job interview. In providing the support required by students undertaking this task, university teachers, who might lack direct experience themselves of the kinds of workplaces their students are planning to enter, could benefit from collaboration with local companies that hire graduates. Indeed, this could be vital, given that developing sociopragmatic competence in multilingual contexts without explicit, guided attention is difficult to achieve (Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011; Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). Involving companies in the process could therefore provide real world expertise and professional guidance that university curriculum developers could

draw upon in designing teaching materials and tasks. This study reports on an intervention in the Vietnamese context that involved companies in helping university English teachers to prepare students for job interviews. Company representatives supported the university by providing examples of job advertisements, listing common interview questions, playing the roles of employers in simulated interview tasks and then providing feedback.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Succeeding in job interviews

In a review of research into teaching and learning focused on the employment interview, Newton and Kusmierczyk (2011) analyzed various studies that highlight which factors contribute most directly to the outcomes (positive or negative) of job interviews. Regarding negative outcomes, Sarangi and Roberts (2004), for example, report of international medical candidates failing, not because of limited professional competence but instead due to an inability to discuss their personal and professional work experience to the satisfaction of their interlocutors. During interactive talk, these candidates were provided with cues that were missed. Failing to respond to the interviewers' prompts, and therefore demonstrating a lack of sociopragmatic competence, appeared to be the crucial factor in determining outcomes in these cases. To perform successfully in job interviews, Lim, Winter and Chan (2006) recommend that candidates compare their own culture with that of the target culture to gain a deeper understanding of implicit expectations, a strategy which can lead to the development of sociopragmatic competence. Similarly focusing on aspects of culture, in the context of helping migrants in Canada to negotiate job interviews successfully, Louw, Derwing and Abbott (2010) recommend that authentic models of successful communication strategies that stress aspects of sociopragmatic competence are studied during training. The focus of such training needs to be highly practical, embedding the development of sociopragmatic competence into the teaching of interview skills (Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011; Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). This leads to the question, though: What constitutes successful interview behaviour? We consider this next.

2.2 What constitutes successful interview behaviour?

If candidates are to succeed in job interviews, so that they are subsequently offered the job, it is crucial, firstly, that they are well-prepared (Lazarus, 2004). Secondly, it is essential that they conduct themselves in a professional manner during the interview, interacting in a way that demonstrates skillful use of non-verbal as well as verbal aspects of communication. They thus need to use dimensions of body language, such as eye contact, facial expression and posture (Candita, 2006), which can only really be effectively deployed with sociopragmatic competence. This sociopragmatic competence also facilitates the use of humour, which can be vital in establishing rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2005; van de Mieroop & Schnurr, 2018), and can help to establish affiliation and solidarity (Lipovsky, 2006, 2008). Interviewees also need to know how much to say, and how to do so clearly, in a relevant manner, and with an appropriate level of self-confidence (Grice, 1989; Nunn, 2006). Moreover, they need to know when to engage in relational talk, i.e. talk focused on building rapport, and when to switch to transactional talk, i.e. talk focused more on content (Holmes, 2000; Koester, 2006). During interviews, small talk, which is a

feature of relational talk, occurs frequently (Coupland, 2003), and so interviewees need to be able to employ it in a way that demonstrates sociopragmatic competence.

Interviewees also need to be able to transition to transactional talk at a time when it is appropriate. Drawing on their preparation, they should be ready to answer questions in a way that highlights that the vacant position is a good match for their background knowledge, work experience and ambitions for the future. They should, moreover, project a positive mindset by answering open-ended questions in a way that reflects forward-looking problem-solving abilities (Kerekes, 2006; Noor, Tab & Kamarulzaman, 2017). Throughout the process, they need to demonstrate that they understand the interviewer's questions and confirm that the interviewer understands their answers, which entails knowing how to clarify, verify understanding and elicit information (Powell & Generoso, 2012), as they make their sociopragmatic competence explicit. Additionally, in contexts where it is socioculturally appropriate, they should have the confidence to ask transactional questions in the latter part of the interview, even at some basic levels such as about the compensation package and benefits (Lazarus, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial that interviewees possess sociopragmatic competence in English.

2.3 The gap between theory and practice

While sociopragmatic competence is clearly necessary in interviewees, in reality there is research reporting of potential employees confessing that they lack such competence. For example, many participants in Powell and Generoso's (2012) study of a non-credit vocational ESL class for adult immigrant students from different countries in San Francisco stressed that they needed to learn how they should "talk about themselves without talking too much, how to explain why they are a good candidate for the job" (p. 4).

Failing to understand what the interviewer wants and respond in an appropriately sociopragmatic way can be problematic. For example, in a study conducted by Louw et al. (2010), two out of three candidates responded inappropriately to the question 'Why did you choose engineering?', listing personal achievements in one case, or citing parental advice in the other; the latter strategy conveyed the impression that the choice had not been voluntary.

Failing to respond in an appropriately polite way, given the local sociopragmatics, can also be devastating. By requesting clarification in a way that is perceived as impolite, e.g. by asking: 'What did you say?' rather abruptly, rather than: 'Excuse me, could you repeat that, please?', interviewees may be more likely to fail (LoCastro, 2012). Indeed, sociopragmatic errors can cause more harm than grammatical or lexical errors since they can convey a negative attitude (Gumperz, 1992; LoCastro, 2012).

Job candidates do tend to worry about their language and communication skills, as large-scale survey research, conducted by Iva and Eliska (2016) in the Czech Republic, has revealed. Perhaps job candidates' apprehensions are sometimes misdirected, though, since employers in the same study were more concerned about the job candidates' flexibility and

adaptability, followed by their willingness to learn, loyalty and self-reliance. Sociopragmatic competence is required to convey such positive qualities (Lipovsky, 2006, 2008).

Interviewers may use various strategies to help interviewees succeed, for example, by back-channeling to indicate agreement through the use of expressions such as 'Yeah', 'Okay', 'Right', 'Exactly', 'Good for you' (Miller, 2013). This kind of back-channeling, which, in Miller's study, took place in a Vietnamese setting, indicated that the interviewee's statements were unproblematic, thus encouraging her to continue to talk and maintain the collaborative interaction.

However, apart from Miller (2003), there has been relatively little on this topic in the Vietnamese context. Moreover, although there are accounts of focused interventions developing sociopragmatic competence for employability skills in general (e.g. Holmes & Riddiford, 2011), there is little in the literature on pedagogical methods of building sociopragmatic competence in graduating students' interview skills in particular with the help of company support. This is notwithstanding research in the Malaysian context by Noor et al. (2017), which also reported on developing interview skills with the help of company support, but which drew on a different theoretical framework. With a view to addressing these gaps in the literature, in this study we evaluate an intervention designed to help undergraduate Vietnamese students develop features of sociopragmatic competence that may help them to succeed in job interviews. We first, though, describe the context.

2.4 The research context
The research was carried out at a university of information technology in Vietnam. As with many other local universities, two-thirds of the students entering this university have limited English proficiency, particularly in terms of listening and speaking skills (Vo, 2015; Vo et al., 2016). Whilst the goal of the university English program is to meet the needs of the industry and produce graduates who have communicative competence in English, seventy-five percent of the students have an elementary level in English on entering the university, which makes achieving the goal of the English programme challenging.

In order to meet the English programme's main goal, various strategies have been employed. Firstly, the English curriculum has recently been revised so as to provide balanced coverage of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, rather than focus just on grammar and reading comprehension, as was previously the case (Vo, 2015). Secondly, the university English teachers have been invited to develop supplementary materials for pronunciation and grammar practice to update and support the English programme, with a view to helping learners with low levels of English to gradually improve their listening comprehension and speaking (Vo, 2015). Finally, the findings of a previous and related study (Vo, 2015; Vo et al., 2016) that investigated the workplace needs of graduates have been shared within the university. The findings of this original research (Vo, 2015) highlighted needs for greater sociopragmatic competence in English

amongst students and a fuller capacity to engage in relational and transactional talk, with implications for English language teaching at the university. It has been conceived that one way of addressing this situation would be to involve local companies in raising awareness of workplace needs at the university through demonstrating what was required at the job interview. I (the first author of this paper, an English language teacher employed at the same university) hoped that involving companies in this way could help support English language learners to develop sociopragmatic competence, and specifically the capacity to engage in relational and transactional talk appropriately, to help them succeed in job interviews. The current study reports on this educational innovation.

3. Method

3.1 Research Question
Our specific research question is as follows: How useful does involving local companies in supporting English language learners at a Vietnamese university to develop sociopragmatic competence in English in preparation for job interviews appear to be? The investigation adopted a case study approach (Richards, 2003), drawing on different sources of data to explore a specific intervention within a Vietnamese university of technology in Ho Chi Minh City.

3.2 Participants
Given the focus of the intervention, representatives from four local companies that the first researcher had earlier established cooperative working relationships with (Vo, 2015; Vo et al., 2016) were invited to take part. These companies all engage in business internationally. The participants supplied by these companies represented a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) of six men and one woman in the age range 40-50. The participants included human resource (HR) managers with experience in recruiting graduates and providing training. One of the companies was represented by three people: a male HR manager, a male manager of training and a male native English teacher. A second company was represented by a female HR manager and a male manager of training. The remaining two companies were each represented by a male HR manager. Table 1 provides a summary of the participating companies, numbered rather than named to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1: Participants from the local companies

Companies	Number of representatives	Positions
1	3	a HR manager
		a manager of training
		a native English teacher
2	1	a HR manager
3	2	a HR manager
		a manager of training
4	1	a HR manager

Three students volunteered to be interviewed in a whole class setting by these company representatives. The three were university students who had IT majors and intermediate levels of English, namely B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2011). They were all male, and were in the field of engineering or programming. They were studying on four-year Bachelor degree programmes at the university. Their concern was to apply for a job such as software engineer or website designer after graduation. None of them had experience in the real workplace. All of them were members of student societies or clubs for English practice at the university to improve their soft skills. They were presumably motivated to volunteer, as they were informed in advance that participating might have a positive impact on their interview skills.

3.3 The intervention
After being approached by the first researcher, the company representatives agreed to support the English language initiative by:
- Providing examples of real job advertisements for vacant positions that graduates would be interested in applying for, mainly software engineer or website developer posts.
- Providing a list of common interview questions that are often used in interviews.
- Playing the role of employers in simulated interview panels that would be held in a whole class setting with an audience of students from different English classes and teachers.

3.3.1 Planning for simulated job interviews
After various discussions, job advertisements were developed, adapted from those on the companies' websites, and a list of job interview questions was collaboratively developed, as listed in Table 2:

Table 2: List of interview questions

General questions
1. Tell me about yourself
2. Tell me about some projects you have worked on in the past.
3. What do you know about this company/position?
4. Why do you want this job?
5. How do you handle stressful situations and working under pressure?
6. What are you like working in a team?
Specific (technical) questions
7. What is your greatest strength?
8. What is your biggest weakness?
9. Do you know Java/ C^{++}?
10. How many access modifiers does (e.g. C^{++}) have?
11. Tell us some methods to develop User Interface (UI)?
12. What has been your biggest professional disappointment/achievement so far?

13. Why should we hire you (choose you)?
14. Regarding salary, what are your expectations?
15. Do you have any questions for us?

3.3.2 The simulated job interviews

The simulated job interviews were conducted at the university. Representatives from the companies played the role of interviewers/ employers. The room was set up with a table at the front, so that the observers, including 40 students and 5 teachers, could easily follow the proceedings. The interview panel sat on one side of the table and the candidate on the other. The interviewees were three students, randomly selected from those who had raised their hands volunteering to be interviewed; they were invited to be interviewed for the position of software engineer. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each. All interviews were video-recorded, with the permission of the participants. English language was used throughout the interviews. After each interview, the company representatives gave feedback to the whole group, making it easy for the audience to follow and learn. The interviewers gave additional feedback at the end of the event, summarizing the key points they wanted to emphasize for the audience.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

As noted above, the event was video-recorded for educational purposes; the first researcher also kept notes, developing a narrative record. In reporting on this event (simulated job interviews and feedback), two forms of data could thus be accessed: video-recorded data and the first researcher's observation notes.

Following the transcription of the video-recordings, which involved watching, reviewing and note-taking, thorough and detailed analysis was carried out by both researchers. Firstly, themes related to the research objectives were categorized and identified in the transcript for qualitative analysis (Mangubhai et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2009). Secondly, the narrative observational data were integrated with the video-recorded data, according to the thematic categories identified as of interest for this research. This was achieved through re-reading the observation notes and comparing these to the transcripts made from watching and listening to the recordings. Themes were then written up in a way that should facilitate the depicting of reality (Silverman, 2001). The findings are organized sequentially, considering first the performance of the interviewees at different stages of the interviews and then the overall feedback the interviewees received from the company representatives, after all three interviews had been conducted. Following these steps will help us to assess the usefulness of the intervention.

4. Findings and discussion
4.1 The interviews and immediate feedback

This first section of the findings will explore how the interviewees responded to the interviewers' questions, starting from the initial impressions they made and the general questions they answered, which led to specific and technical questions.

4.1.1 First impressions and introductions

As observed, the three candidates all looked nervous when they started. However, after the company representatives offered handshakes, greeted them with 'Good morning' and invited the candidates to sit down, they appeared more relaxed. Relational talk had a calming effect at this stage.

4.1.2 General questions

General questions were used in the interviews, including 'Tell me about yourself'. This is the first common question in an interview, which is supposed to be easy to deal with. However, when answering this question, the first interviewee started talking almost immediately about the job, while the company representatives would probably have liked to know a bit about himself, for example, family, hobbies, favourite sport (see Table 3).

In Tables 3-5 and 7-9, the interviewers are numbered 1-4 by company, following the order in Table 1, while the students are numbered sequentially 1-3. Students' names, where they offered them, have been changed. So the key is as follows:

I1 = Interviewer from Company 1

Is = Interviewers

S1 = Student 1

Table 3: *The first interviewee answering general questions*

I2: Ok, tell us about yourself. Who you are?...
S1: My name is An. As you know, I am a student at UIT, my major is Computer Science, I have some experience working with UI (user interface), programming at university. I can be an effective member of a team, I can work under pressure if it is needed. The last project I have done is a game application 'email exchange' for English Zone, I worked with my teammate at university. As for a solution, I have had some experience in working in teams, dealing with the 'customer' and solving problems with something that happened.
I2: Thanks. Just a personal question. How old are you?
S1: I'm 20 years old.
I4: Why do you choose IT?
S1: Because I would like to use the technical, IT to make our lives better.
….
S1: Eh, I think when I was a child, my family wanted to make a restaurant… and I think IT can help.

As we can see from Table 3, after introducing his name, the first candidate soon talked about his experience working in UI (user interface) and programming or his teamwork at university. The interviewer then had to lead the interviewee back to some personal information by asking 'How old are you?'. However, the interview then improved, as a company representative commented: "Then the question was 'why IT, why do you choose IT?' This is an amazing answer because you did talk about yourself, your family; you said IT can support your family and yourself, money and health".

Similarly, the second candidate had the same problem answering the question: 'Tell me about yourself', as is shown in Table 4:

Table 4: The second interviewee answering general questions

I1: Ok, tell me about yourself, not about IT; technical questions may come later, just tell us about yourself, who you are.
S2: Ok, as you know, my name is Đon, I'm a student in UIT, second year student, my major is computer science…..
I2: (Stop), no technical information; we first would like to know who you are, what you like.
S2: Ok, my favourite thing is IT, I really love IT, programming, I really like design applications. I like to make these things for people to use, and I can do with interface, I think so…
I1: Ok, have you got any friends?
S2: Yes, I have a group of friends; we meet when we have free time; we also have some activities like football or outdoor activities…

In answering general introductory questions, the second candidate started to talk about his technical experience in programming. He was very keen to state that he had experience in programming languages such as C++, PHP, HTML and CSS. Interestingly, the interviewer stopped him politely indicating that the purpose of the question was to know about his general personality, general interests and attitude. It is clear that the interviewer sought the ability of the candidate to engage in relational talk to get insights into the candidate's characteristics. There was a lack of awareness in the student that interviews require relational as well as transactional talk, and that these can be closely related in the fulfilment of aims (Koester, 2006; Powell & Generoso, 2012). This lack of awareness explains why both S1 and S2 quickly shifted the discourse to talk about their specific knowledge. They did not appear to realize that telling interviewers about themselves is a way to indicate they have the personality that suits the position being applied for, and so fulfils transactional as well as relational purposes.

The third interviewee, who had observed the simulated interviews of the previous interviewees, performed much better, as is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The third interviewee answering general questions

I3: Tell me about yourself
S3: My name is Lien, fullname Tran Ngoc Lien, someone says it is girly, but I like my name.
I3: Ok, we would like in an efficient way to know who you are?
S3: Er.., I am from UIT, and my major is computer engineering. In my family, there are 4 members and I love my family; my family is very supportive of me and my family is very important to me; especially too, I have lots of friends and I have close friends,

> I love to work in a team; I want to work in team work with my friends because they are very positive; when I meet the challenge I can share the problem with them and we solve it together. My hobbies are football and reading books; sometimes I love cartoons, I love watching movies, especially romantic movies…If I have some words to describe myself, I think I am hard-working; I work hard, I push myself under pressure…

The company representatives thought that the answers of the third candidate were more effective. They commented: "The answer is what we really like; it is for a common question 'Tell me about yourself' [….] about family, being positive and taking challenging tasks, excellent answer'". Compared to the first two candidates, the third candidate achieved the interviewers' approval with a detailed answer about who he was and what he liked. There was also an element of self-deprecatory humour about it, in the way he commented on his name. Utilizing humour is a useful sociopragmatic strategy for building rapport (van de Mieroop & Schnurr, 2018). Given these characteristics, his contribution appeared to succeed as transactional and relational talk.

However, the third candidate also talked about himself too much, which can be problematic, as highlighted by Powell and Generoso (2012). As the company representatives continued giving feedback to the interviewee, one said: "You spoke for four minutes instead of one minute; it is good English but you didn't follow the direction. We say it now 'one minute' but we probably would not say that in a real interview; remember 'one minute' is really the maximum for any answer". The interviewee spent four minutes for his one-minute answer. This broke Grice's (1989) maxim of quantity; i.e. regarding the amount of information provided. According to Grice, an answer should be as informative as is required and not more informative than is required. Breaking this maxim was reflected in the overuse of the time allowance.

In summary, as is shown in Table 6, for general questions, two of the three candidates did not seem to be aware of the need for relational talk. They were only interested in proceeding to talk about their experience and work. Only one candidate responded to the interviewer with the expected information, though he was not able to meet the time limit.

Table 6: *Responses of interviewees to general questions*

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3
First impression (handshake, greeting, smile)	Y	Y	Y
Awareness of the need for relational talk	X	X	Y
Meeting the time limit.	Y	Y	X

Key: Y = Yes   X= No

We now consider responses to specific and technical questions.

4.1.3 Specific/technical questions
Specific/technical questions included: '*There are two ways to design User Interface (UI), can you tell me the difference?', 'Do you know Java?' 'What are your weaknesses?*' The first candidate was not successful in answering these questions. This candidate showed his lack of technical confidence and limited sociopragmatic competence for successful interaction, as Table 7 shows:

***Table 7:** Responses of the first interviewee to technical questions*

I1: Now a technical question, you tell me you work with UI, can you tell me how many methods you use in this?
S1: Sorry, can you say again?
I1: Ok, there are two ways to work with UI, can you tell me the difference?
S1: I **am sorry..(laugh)** to tell you that, I have no ideas about that.
I1: Ok, which method do you use to develop your UI?
S1: I use Window Form
I1: Ok, and you don't use any other…?
S1: No...
I1: Ok, you don't know what companies use for that… Ok…
I3: Do you have any question for any of us?
S1: Yes, I have question about this position, eh,…I would like to know how many employees are working in this position?
I1: Ok, we have about 1000 employees now in our company.
S1: Wow, so…why do you need more?
I1: Just because we have a plan to grow, maybe 2000…
S1: Thank you
Is: Thank you.

Referring to the answers in Table 7, when the candidate did not get the question, he asked: 'Can you say it again?', which could be understood as being not that polite in the interview context. In order to avoid face-threatening, the interviewer said 'Ok' and made the question easier by mentioning two ways to work with UI. In doing so, the interviewer encouraged him to talk and offered a collaborative way forward in the interaction.

However, in response, unaware of the relational work or face work (Coupland, 2003; Miller, 2013) being adopted by the interviewer, the interviewee said: 'I am sorry, I have no ideas about that'. Saying 'I am sorry' could have indicated that the interviewee respects the interviewer. This is related to a cultural factor; Vietnamese people always want to show respect to people who are older or in higher positions than themselves (Vo, 2015; Vo et al., 2016). This explains why the interviewee said 'I am sorry' instead of saying 'I could not do it' more directly in his answer. Nevertheless, despite how positive this utterance could

be, the interviewee was not able to build rapport with the interviewer, and thus reduce the possible gap between them. Indeed, the interviewee laughed, which showed nervousness because he did not know the answer to the technical questions. Unfortunately, this could be read as not taking the questions seriously, i.e. demonstrating a poor attitude (Lipovsky, 2008; LoCastro, 2012). This was, in fact, a missed opportunity to apply sociopragmatic competence through utilizing positive self-appraisals (Noor et al., 2017). The interviewee could have highlighted his skills by mentioning that he also had some positive attributes such as knowledge of Window Form, which can be used to develop the UI. He could have informed the interviewer that he used Window Form for UI, instead of saying he did not know the methods mentioned by the company.

In contrast with the first candidate, the second candidate was able to deal with the technical questions much more effectively, as is evident in Table 8. When he was asked about Java, which he did not know, he accepted that he did not know about Java, but mentioned that he was very good at C++ at the same time.

Table 8: Responses of the second interviewee to technical questions

> I1: You have quite a lot of experience, do you know Java?
> S2: Er, actually, I don't use it
> I1: Yes, but do you know about it?
> S2: Yes,
> I1: Ok, so I have a question: how many access modifiers does Java have?
> S2: I am sorry **that I am not good at Java, but I am very good at C++**
> I1: Ok, so I have another question for C++: How many access modifiers does C++ have? We have got the office, private and what else?
> S2: And the protective
> I1: Can you tell me the difference between them?
> S2: The differences between them are: the office, the users outside can access the office, while the private, the others can not access it; as for the protective, it is used in case something is good to keep….
> I1: Ok, it is a good answer. Thanks.
> I3: You have a lot of confidence today. Why do we hire you?
> S1: Yes, I think I am a good person for this position because I have technical and soft skills. I can also communicate in English, er, so, I think that's good for the position. Another thing is that I have done research and I think I will do my best for the position.
> I3, I4: Great.
> Is: Thank you. We will tell you the results in a few more days.
> S2: Thank you. Goodbye.

After emphasizing he knew about C++, this candidate received very encouraging feedback comments from the company representatives: "It is very positive about your interview, you made it positive when you gave a very good answer: 'I don't know much about Java, but I

am very good at C++'". As we can see from Table 8, the interviewee invited the interviewer to ask him about what he knew instead of being asked about what he did not know. In this way, he was able to tell the company representative more about himself. This demonstrates that a skillful interviewee can exploit opportunities provided by employers' open-ended questions to talk about points of strengths (Powell & Generosa, 2012). This quality may have influenced the company representatives' final evaluation: "I would hire you if it were a real interview. Congratulations!" It is noteworthy that not only confidence in using English but also positive self-presentation (Kerekes, 2006), which relates to sociopragmatic competence (Lipovsky, 2006, 2008), contributed to the candidate's success. This interviewee was successful because he did not discuss aspects in which he lacked adequate evidence, e.g. he did not know much about Java. This also relates to Grice's (1989, p. 27) quality maxim: "try to make your contribution one that is true". Additionally, in discussing C++ instead, because he knew more about it, he was able to be relevant and clear, which relate to Grice's maxims of relation and manner.

Like the first candidate, the third candidate discussed his weaknesses extensively (see Table 9). In so doing, he was insufficiently skilled to follow Grice's (1989) maxim regarding the need to provide the appropriate quantity of information and not too much. So, when he discussed his weaknesses for too long, unfortunately these weaknesses were emphasized.

Table 9: *Responses of the third interviewee to technical questions*

I1: Ok, what is your biggest weakness?
S3: My weakness is I am not confident in myself, I am very nervous in the interview today, but I would like to overcome it…
I1: That's your weakness. I would like to hear about your failures in your life.
S3: I lose my project, er, I work hard, but er… I don't want to find the solution for the project, I failed it… it is my biggest weakness.
I2: So you said you could not deal with the project the teacher provided you? How did you react? What can you learn from your failure?
S3: I came to see the lecturer and, er… I tell him I can't find the … solution. I learn… when I do something I do my best… but if I cannot do it … er, I tell my lecturer, and… (smile…) and …
S3: Yes … I would like to know, eh, er… the benefits… if I work for your company, I would like to improve my knowledge ...
I1: Yes, we have training courses for employees… or activities for employees… is that what you want to ask?
S3: Yes, …. er know some more information or and can I work in … other countries?
I1: Yes…working overseas, some employees do… some of them don't want to, but many employees work offshore every year…
S3: …uh, thank you very much
Is: Thank you.

As Table 9 shows, the third candidate discussed his failure in detail. He appeared to be trapped in a negative direction. When the interviewer offered support by asking him an open-ended question: "What can you learn from your failure?", he did not exploit the opportunity to escape from the difficult situation. This is what the company representatives expected from him, as they commented: "When you discuss your negative points, don't talk about it too long, try to get out of it as soon as you can, turn it into positive, talking about something you are good at. So you have to prepare for that".

When the candidate said he could not do it, but "when I do something, I try my best", it can be understood that he was employing a politeness strategy in order to avoid face-threat (Holmes, 2000). However, this caused a contradiction in his answer. Furthermore, he likely intended to show respect (Vo, 2015); for example, he mentioned the role of his teacher in helping him to solve his problem. He was not aware that these comments could reduce the credibility of his answer to the question.

Table 10 shows that only one of the three candidates was able to establish sufficient rapport with the company representatives to enable successful communication in the interviews. Rapport, as Louw et al. (2010) highlight, concerns behavioral expectations, face sensitivity and interactional needs (transactional or relational). This analysis underlines that candidates require sociopragmatic competence to succeed in job interviews.

Table 10: *Overall responses to technical questions*

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3
Make clarifications, verify comprehension and elicit feedback from interviewers' questions	X	Y	X
Respond to open-ended questions to talk about strengths	X	Y	X
Apply politeness strategies and engage successfully in interactional talk (relational or transactional)	X	Y	X
Ask questions in the latter part of the interview	Y	X	Y

Key: Y = Yes   X= No

4.2 Feedback at the end of the session

In the feedback given after all three interviews, the company representatives highlighted the following: Firstly, they stressed that general questions could create a relaxed environment for both interviewer and interviewee to move on with further difficult professional questions. All the company representatives preferred candidates to talk about themselves, their family, what is challenging or positive for them in life, rather than have candidates immediately talking about their specific knowledge. Therefore, they valued relational talk at this stage. There is a general preference in such interview situations for relational interactions to take precedence over the discussion of work issues (Coupland, 2003; Powell & Generoso, 2012).

Secondly, the company representatives gave feedback about responses to technical questions. Although all three volunteer interviewees appeared to have good English language skills in general (in relation to their cohort), two of them lacked the sociopragmatic competence in how to use their conversational English to exploit questions from the interviewers to talk about their strengths, i.e. to draw sufficiently on cultural knowledge to meet the goal of the conversation (Holmes, 2000; Koester, 2006). As the company representatives commented, it was fine if the candidate did not know the answer to a question; indeed, they also accepted the interviewee who said he did not know the answer regarding Java. However, he was expected to be positive, even if he did not know the answer, to convert a negative point to a positive one, and so demonstrate a positive attitude (Lipovsky, 2008; Noor et al., 2017). One company representative stated (to S3):

> We want to know some of your negative points but you should know how to turn your negative points into something positive… be careful with the words 'I don't' and 'I can't', it is negative, focus more on what 'I can do', 'I can't do Java, but I can do C++ very well', like candidate 2 said, that is how you can change it to make it positive...

Thirdly, the company representatives liked candidates to ask questions, as they said: "If you don't understand something, just ask questions. We like people to ask us questions". They went on to provide support in how to phrase questions effectively. For example, the company representatives defined terms such as 'benefits' and 'advantages' for their context. This was prompted by misunderstandings evident in the discourse of the third candidate. They explained to him that "benefits are free parking, insurance, holiday, vacation, T-shirt, whereas advantages are opportunities". However, they also advised the interviewees that such questions should be left to an appropriate time during the interview when they receive the indication that they can ask them.

The company representatives gave instructions to the interviewees regarding how to ask clarification questions, verify comprehension and elicit feedback from interviewers' questions: "when you cannot get the questions clearly, just say 'sorry …can you say the question again?' Or repeat the question to make sure you understand". Furthermore, the company representatives explicated how the open-ended questions can be exploited. They stated that they asked questions just to prompt the candidate to ask more questions for

discussion and not for the exact answer. For example, when the company representative asked the question "What is your expectation of the salary?", the candidates could say "I would like to know more about the position", or "I would like to know a bit more about the standards in the company so that I can answer the question more effectively". It is fine for the interviewee to tell the interviewer that s/he needs more information before answering the question.

Afterwards, the audience of the simulated interviews (i.e. teachers and learners) was very appreciative of the feedback, agreeing it had been very valuable. Exposure to real world discourse in the local context can be extremely helpful in developing communicative competence, as experts (e.g. Holmes & Riddiford, 2011; Nunn, 2006, 2007; Noor et al., 2017) agree. By helping the university with the simulated interviews, the company representatives provided opportunities for the learning of skills that are necessary for graduates to be successful in an interview, and later at the workplace. This kind of event can also lead to awareness-raising within the university, regarding why it is important to develop sociopragmatic competence in learners, and how it can be achieved through creating communicative situations. We now offer broader conclusions.

5. Conclusion

As the analysis above reveals, involving local companies in helping English language learners at the university to prepare for job interviews through offering a simulation of the interview process and providing feedback led to a positively-received learning event. Great credit must go to the company representatives who gave freely of their time in planning the intervention and carrying it out. Though not academics with theoretical knowledge of ways of supporting the development of sociopragmatic competence, these company representatives demonstrated high levels of practical knowledge of how job candidates need to engage in interviews in ways that achieve relational and transactional goals (Holmes, 2000; Koester, 2006). Moreover, they were able to share this practical knowledge with the interviewees and observers, including teachers, in an accessible way. As key stakeholders who would potentially be in the position to recruit, in real life, some of the students assembled at the event in the future, the company representatives could provide valuable advice that carried weight.

For such an intervention to have long-term benefits, though, the insights gained from it need to be acted upon, and there are various implications for in-service professional development and curriculum design in this and similar university contexts. It is necessary, first, for English language teachers at the university to be aware of any gap between the English language provision at the university and their students' career needs, which can be achieved both by going into the workplace to see what new recruits need to do with English (Vo et al., 2016) and by bringing company representatives into the university, the strategy adopted here. One benefit of this second strategy in this case was that the university teachers observing the simulated interviews described above could not have failed to notice that their students, acting as aspiring job candidates, lacked the sociopragmatic competence needed to succeed. Insights need to be acted upon, though, in

teaching and materials design. One avenue would be through Koester's (2010) discourse-based approach. This approach highlights the value of using recordings of authentic workplace interactions to focus on instances of relational and transactional talk. Analyzing transcripts, such as those presented in Tables 3-5 and 7-9, could also be an option for teachers preparing their students for the job interview. For example, students could be invited to compare the candidates' performance in different segments of the interview, focusing on any linguistic features of the text that they find relevant to their analysis (Tomlinson, 2003), and form their own conclusions. Feedback could then raise awareness of the importance of engaging in relational and transactional talk in ways that demonstrate sociopragmatic competence.

Based on this report of an intervention to improve job interview skills in a Vietnamese university, we are able to suggest, then, ways of bridging the gap between limited sociopragmatic competence amongst graduating students and their career needs for such competence. Our study also provides data that could be used by teachers in this and similar technology university contexts to help bridge that gap. Students in other kinds of institution in this and other countries might have very different needs, however, limiting the 'naturalistic generalizations' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) the reader may draw from our qualitative analysis. Moreover, the strategy of involving local companies in supporting the university to simulate job interviews in the way described in this article is a strategy that requires close relationships between the companies and the university, if it is to succeed. These relationships may require considerable investment of time and energy to establish, and therefore the willingness of stakeholders to commit to the endeavour. Our research suggests, however, that if the effort is made, it may be worthwhile.

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