A Discursive Approach to Interactions at Job Interviews and its Implication for Training

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the differences in the language strategies used by successful and unsuccessful candidates at job interviews in order to train university students for this task. To do so, a study with final year students at the University of Malaya taking a course called *Communication for Employment* was conducted. Seventeen students attended simulated job interviews for entry level jobs in the accounting field and were interviewed and assessed by an experienced Human Resource manager. The relationship between successful and unsuccessful interviews is explored using a discourse based approach and ethnographic notes.

Keywords: job interviews, discursive approach, impression management

Introduction

The employability of graduates from local universities in Malaysia is of concern to stake holders, namely the universities, parents, students as well as the government. The Human Resource Minister of Malaysia in an address to some local university students cited critical and thinking skills together with English language communication skills as factors influencing the marketability of graduates from universities in Malaysia (Habibu, 2008). As the job interview is one of the first steps toward employment, job seekers inevitably have to perform well in order to

secure job offers. Job seekers' performance will include demonstrating that they have critical thinking skills, creativity and good communication skills in English. This, to some extent, is impression management (Higgins & Judge, 2004). Thus, preparing students for job interviews is an important component of ESP courses. A survey of some ESP courses at some local public universities showed that there is a "gap" between what is offered in such courses and the "immediate needs of the students once they exit the university" (Zarina & Taufik, 2011). To fill that gap, this research was conducted to explore the communicative characteristics of the successful and unsuccessful job interviews attended by university students who are about to enter the job market.

Job interviews can be investigated via several aspects such as the language use or specifically focusing on effective strategies from successful applicants. The stance taken in this case study is to examine the language strategies used by the candidates at the mock job interviews which is of interest because it is one of the first steps in the job seeking process. This study is driven by three research questions, namely:

1. What are the language strategies used by the successful candidates when answering questions at job interviews?

2. In what ways were they used?

3. How can the strategies used by successful candidates be brought into training courses for job interviews?

In doing a micro level analysis of the talk extracted from the mock interviews, the findings revealed areas where language strategies could be enhanced and introduced to courses at universities to help students be more aware of the language requirement particularly the strategies they need to use in preparation for their real world interviews upon graduating.

Brief Review on Related Literature

Job Interviews

The employment interview is a popular selection technique to access candidates and their suitability for specific jobs that is used by many organizations. It has also been a popular topic for research for around 100 years (Macan, 2009). As initial interviews tend to be rather short, accurate assessment of the suitability of the candidate is crucial to the success of the selection process. Among the factors that have been cited to have been found to influence interviewers' evaluations are paper qualifications like GPA, work experience, gender, age and race (Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Interviewees' verbal and non-verbal behaviours can also influence interviewers' assessment of them (Macan, 2009).

According to Van Rees (1992), there are eight phases in the sequential structure of job interviews and she has posited that phase 4 is central to the interview.   This study will focus on phase 4 and 5 of the structure, namely exchange of information and explicitization of the information. Table 1 shows the phases listed by Van Rees. Phase 4 is the site where the interviewer gives information about his company and the position that has been advertised while candidates on the other hand, provide information about themselves. This is the phase of the interview where question-answer sequences are most prevalent. According to Linell (2003), in real job interviews, the interviewer asks agenda questions and contingently related responsive follow-up questions. This is a way of testing the candidates on their ability to provide the right answers.

TABLE 1: Eight Phases of job interviews

Phase	
1.	opening of the interview
2.	explicitization of the procedure and the agenda for the interview
3.	explicitization of the information known so far
4.	exchange of information
5.	explicitization of the information known so far
6.	technical information about the job
7.	explicitization of further procedure
8.	closing of the interview

Adapted from Van Rees, 1992, p. 143.

Pathak (2008) who asserted that job interviews are not authentic communicative events, added that such tasks place pressure on the interviewees who have the burden to perform well so as to be selected for the job. He proposed therefore that   students who attend courses to prepare them for job interviews must be given the "reality" and not formulaic expressions, or accurate use of language without understanding the pragmatics of language use. In fact, Pathak listed "interruptions, disruptions, inaccuracies, mishandlings, and failures of communication strategies" (p. 31) as evident in the interviewer's discourse and this often is not highlighted to students. Coverage of actual discourse of interviews, preferably from real interviews provides the necessary exposure to enable learners to be better prepared to face interviews, filling the gap between classroom teaching and the real world of industry.

Impression Management (IM)

It is also crucial that interviewees at job interviews create a good impression since it can result in a positive outcome. A strategy that is commonly used is Impression Management (IM), and this concept has been applied to many instances of verbal presentation of self, either at interviews or multi party interactions. It has been found that it is relatively easy to manage one's impression in an interview lasting about 30 minutes as compared to managing one's impression over an extended period (Higgins & Judge, 2004). It has also been shown that when candidates of job interviews provide more details, personalize their responses and are more specific in their answers, they give a better impression of their expertise to interviewers (Scheuer 2001, Lipovsky 2006).

A Discursive approach

Interaction between two parties in job interviews is inevitably verbal in nature. Apart from some non- verbal and paralinguistic features, the primary focus is on the talk itself, which is a form of spoken discourse.   A discursive analysis of the talk was done to examine the strategies used by the interactants. Investigations of such verbal interactions fill a gap that many communication scholars and practitioners have called for, that is to incorporate real language use into courses that are relevant. Too often, prescribed texts offer stifling examples and well-structured forms of talk which does not occur in the real world contexts (Koester 2006, Handford 2010). Using naturally occurring talk from real world events would expose the communication students to know what to expect and better prepare them for the task and in this case, job interviews. The language strategies would include the turns at talk, repetitions or rephrasing, choice of lexis, pragmatic features such as hesitation devices like uh, um, and mm.

Methodology

In order to examine the language strategies used at job interviews, this study was carried out in mock job interview sessions attended by 17 final year students from the Faculty of Business and Accountancy volunteered to be the subjects. Contact was made with an experienced Human Resource manager who agreed to take part in this study and played the role of the interviewer (henceforth IR). The candidates were earlier asked to write a letter of application in response to an advertisement for a position as an auditor prior to the interview. The job advertisement can be found in Appendix A.

The entire session lasted 3 hours and 10 minutes. The IR posed questions that were typical of any first job interview. Each candidate was questioned for an average of 11.2 minutes. The interviews were conducted by looking at the candidates as a whole and whether the candidates would be able to blend with the culture of a company as well as be part of a team. The interviews done were also based on the assumption that the candidates had met the minimum requirements for the job. No discussion on the technical aspects of the job was done

during the interview. The interviewer reviewed the recordings later and gave his response. The analyses done were based on the transcripts of the interviews and the feedback from the interviewer after the interviews.

In order to identify the language strategies, common questions posed by the IR were identified. There were three strands observed and they are:

1. What is your career aspiration?
2. What are your interests?
3. What experiences do you have?

For this paper, a detailed study was made for the first question, which is "What is your career aspiration?"

Results and Discussion

The analysis of data was done using various discourse tools, employing the use of lexis, repetition and rephrasing, turns at talk and how the candidates manage their image. Feedback from the IR was also used to add support to the analysis. Of the 17 candidates, four passed the interview and were successful. The other 13 did not get the job and for this paper only two successful (S1 and S2) and two unsuccessful candidates' (U1 and U2) interactions will be discussed.

Successful Candidates:

Extract 1 (Candidate S1)

1	IR	what is your career aspiration in this
2	S1	career aspiration
3	IR	what do you aspire to be in 20 years time
4	S1	uh
5	IR	what do you see yourself as
6	S1	mm I see myself as I mean uhm in five years time I would uh would want to be like a I mean in a managerial level to see myself in a in in a in an established firm
7	IR	mm hmm
8	S1	and uh my salary would be four to five K
9	IR	mm hmm
10	S1	some somewhere around there

11	IR	managerial in what sense in what area
12	S1	uh in audit line
13	IR	in audit
14	S1	uh
15	IR	ok
16	S1	managerial
17	IR	ok alright and 20 years down the road
18	S1	twenty years down the road
19	IR	can you see that far
20	S1	mm maybe by that time I might have diverged and I might have uh created my own business at that time because during the five years times I would will collect all the experiences
21	IR	mm hmm
22	S1	and then maybe 10 years in 10 years I will start my own business that's what I inspire
23	IR	mmhmm
24	S1	hopefully it will happen

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In Extract 1, Candidate S1's responses were considered appropriate as he demonstrated a higher level of thinking and maturity and this was verified by the IR's feedback. Not only did he display language competence, he also to portray a better impression to the IR compared to Candidates U1 and U2. Candidate S1 seemed to have been more prepared to answer this question on career aspiration as he was able to provide more tangible goals to his career path. For example, in Turn 6 he explained that he hoped to reach a managerial level in five years' time with an established firm, and hoped to draw a salary of four to five thousand. His statement of his goal together with the elaboration gave the impression that he was confident. When he was probed further, he narrowed his area of expertise to audit and then explained that he might change his career path and start his own business, after he had gained enough experience. He appeared to have a larger repertoire of words, though it may be pointed out here that he lacked accuracy as can be seen in Turn 20, when instead of saying "diversified" he used the word "diverged", and instead of " started" my own business" he used the word 'created", and "collect all the experiences" instead of "to gain". He also used a number of backchannels which was mostly "mm", but by Turn 16 his speech was almost free of these and appeared smooth and fluent. If compared to U2, S1 in Turn 20 used "mm" only once in his flow of speech while U2 in Turn 18 of extract 4 used "um" and "uh" 6 times in a shorter discourse.

On the whole, S1 appeared to be at ease with the IR. He exuded enthusiasm in his responses. The candidate also supported his enthusiasm by providing details. Although at first he did not answer the IR's question immediately, as seen in Turns 2 and 4, he picked up once he

caught the message. He repeated the words "career aspiration" and gave a minimal response possibly to buy himself time to formulate his answer. This continued till the beginning of Turn 6. He then said that he saw himself having progressed and was in a more senior position in a stable company with a salary that was in line with the position. Despite his initial hesitation, he ably showed that he could think on his feet.   It is interesting to note that although the interviewer asked him about his career aspiration twenty years ahead, he broke down his vision for himself into where he envisioned himself to be in five years, ten years and twenty years. By doing so, he indirectly was showing that he had goals and a vision for his career path.

Candidate S1 successfully answered the IR's questions. By personalizing his answers, he showed that he is a thinking person who is able to make connections in what he is saying. He managed to make a positive impression on the IR, supporting his answers with personal examples from his own observations and experience, as well as providing details. The IR in his post-interview response to the recordings said that he found the candidate confident and was able to express his thoughts clearly.   Overall he came through as a potential good worker who is clear of his goal in life, and probably able to fit in with the company culture.

Extract 2 (Candidate S2)

1	IR	… so what is your aspiration in terms of your career what area do you want to venture yourself into
2	S2	um I consider to venture in the audit line
3	IR	ok
4	S2	it's better for me lah I think because I want to get a professional quali uh qualifications
5	IR	what professional qualifications are you aiming for
6	S2	mm chartered accountant like for example
7	IR	mmhm
8	S2	that's why mm
9	IR	CA
10	S2	so that's why I enter the audit sys uh audit firm for three years after that I can venture my uh studies into ACCA to get my
11	IR	and after that what would you want to do
12	S2	mmm maybe I'll transfer to commercial line to explore more about business
13	IR	ok
14	S2	uh
15	IR	have you ever thought about at the end of it like twenty years down the road what do you see yourself to be
16	S2	I plan to uh open a audit firm
17	IR	mm hmm ok
18	S2	like um my boss Jackson and Co
19	IR	mm hm
20	S2	ah they developed their own company successfully so I want take an example from them

21   IR   true…

A more detailed examination of the verbal discourse in Extract 2 shows that like Candidate S1, Candidate S2 was also able to state her goal, give reasons as well as elaborate on her career aspiration. The exchange between IR and Candidate S2 comprising 21 turns was almost the same as Candidate S1's. However she caught on to the meaning of the question almost immediately as she was able to respond in Turn 2 on what she wanted to do. By Turn 5 when she was asked more specifically regarding the qualification she was aiming for, she could almost instantly say she wanted the chartered accountant's qualification. She gave longer elaborations and appeared to have a better command of her language than Candidate S1 who was recycling his words and used some lexical items inaccurately. Candidate S2 appeared prepared with answers and also showed the ability to think on her feet when she was questioned a few times by the IR, for example in Turns 5, 11, and 15. Interestingly in Turn 15 when she was asked "what do you see yourself to be" in twenty years, she was able to respond again almost immediately that she planned to set up an audit firm, and then went on in Turn 18 to even point out the specific example to emulate. Not only was she able to express herself confidently, she showed maturity of thought. There was some use of backchannels like "uh" and "mm" but this was very minimal as compared to the unsuccessful candidates. There were also some amount of false starts but she was able to self-correct and get back on track. In Turn 4, she began with "quali" then "uh" then "qualifications", and in Turn 10 "I can venture my uh studies into ACCA to get my…mmm maybe I'll transfer to commercial line to explore more about business". She self-repaired her speech, and fluently expressed herself.

Unsuccessful candidates:

Extract 3 (Candidate U1)

1. IR   ... tell me what is your career aspirations
2. U1   oh
3. IR   what you aspire to be
4. U1   ok thank you ok ah when I grow up ah my ambition
               is want to be an accountant
5. IR   mmm
6. U1   and I also have my ambition ah my ambition is ah ah
               to get ACCA certification if all things go well
7. IR   mm hmm
8. U1   ah and that's all

From Extract 3, the verbal interaction between the IR and U1 who is a male, only consist of 8 turns, based on the career aspiration question. It appears that he was not comfortable to be in the interviewee's position. To the IR's question in Turn 1, he responded with "oh' which made the IR rephrase the question. In Turn 4 he appeared to have caught the question and

acknowledged it with "ok", then he offered a pleasantry (thank you) which is almost out of place. The remaining utterance (when I grow up ah my ambition) appeared rather school-like. On the whole, his answers were scant and limited. He recycled the word 'ambition" a few times in the brief exchange and showed a limited repertoire of words. The answers given also did not demonstrate that he had a clear goal in terms of his career aspiration. He was not able to articulate his plan for his career beyond getting the necessary certification. In Turn 8, he terminated his response with "that's all" and this is a direct way of saying he had nothing else to add. A number of occurrences of the hesitancy marker "ah" in U1's discourse gave the impression that he was not confident. This caused the IR to probe and prompt to get more information. Candidate U1 showed an inability to convey his message and hence was considered unsuccessful. In brief, he was not successful at managing his image during the interview. According to the IR, a basic question like asking candidates regarding their career aspiration is meant to make the candidate think. The answers provided by the candidate revealed that he was not able to communicate and 'think on the spot'. In limiting his responses, Candidate U1 did not come across as one who is clear about his plans for his career in the future.

The exchange between IR and U2, an unsuccessful candidate, covers almost the same number of turns as the successful candidate (S1). However apart from this similarity, the strategies used by U2 differ greatly from S1 and S2.

Extract 4 (Candidate U2)

1	IR	...ok what do you aspire to be
2	U2	aspire to be
3	IR	what is your uh career aspiration uh what would you want to achieve maybe in 20 years time down the road
4	U2	oh my career is uh I want to um uh have a own company or I want to help my dad
5	IR	mm hmm
6	U2	because uh uh my dad is open the retailer shop
7	IR	retailer
8	U2	uh retailer uh so I want to uh expand my my dad's shop
9	IR	ok you can actually straightaway go and expand your account your dad's business
10	U2	so I want because I want to gain knowledge from work
11	IR	from the working world
12	U2	in other company first and so from that knowledge I can apply that for for my dad company
13	IR	mm so you do not aim to take some of these qualifications like ACCA and all these
14	U2	so I want to uh take ACCA as I become accountant in my dad company
15	IR	but if it's your dad's company you do not need any qualifications you can straightaway be your be the chief financial officer
16	U2	yes I know but I need for um 20 years or 10 years later so I think
17	IR	it will be a very big company

18	U2	I think um uh so when I gain uh gain my know uh many knowledge so I think it's uh better uh to
19	IR	to help you
20	U2	mm

Candidate U2's responses to IR in Extract 4 are more appropriate than the responses of candidate U1's. However, U2, who is a female, did not succeed at the interview due to various factors. Candidate U2's utterances were filled with hesitation devices. She appeared to have more to say than U1 but was not able to convey her ideas in a clear and concise manner. The many instances of the use of backchannels like 'uh' and 'um' which serve as hesitation devices, as a way to buy time, gave the impression that as she needed to think longer and search for words before she spoke. She also recycled her thoughts and confined her replies to a rather limited scope (have own company, help my dad, retailer shop). When she was prompted further she mentioned that she would take on ACCA to become an accountant in her father's company. When the IR almost teased her about not needing the ACCA qualification since she was going to work for her father and could be a Chief Financial Officer immediately, she was not able to catch on to this nuance. From this it may be inferred that apart from probably a lack of language competence, she also lacked the ability to answer such questions at a job interview. The feedback given by the IR confirms this inference.

Comparison of Successful and Unsuccessful Candidates

To begin, Candidates S1, S2 and U2 had about the same number of turns at talk: 24, 21 and 20 respectively. In the case of S1 and U2, the IR had to rephrase or repeat his main question which is "What is your career aspiration?". While S1, the successful candidate caught on to the question after 4 turns, Candidate U1 took 2 turns to respond. The IR rephrased in both cases to aid their understanding. Candidate S2 did not have this problem and was able to respond almost immediately. However while Candidate S1's subsequent responses showed he had a better understanding of what was required of the question, U2 the unsuccessful candidate appeared to have more difficulty providing the appropriate response. Tables 2 and 3 show the strategies demonstrated by the responses of both successful and unsuccessful candidates

Table 2: Responses about Career Goals and Strategies Employed- Successful Candidates

Candidate	Response	Strategies
S1	in five years' time I would uh would want to be like a I mean in a managerial level to see myself in a in in a in an established firm and uh my salary would be around four five k at least some somewhere around there	**Goal Give elaboration**

S2	I consider to venture in the audit line it's better for me lah I think because I want to get a professional quali uh qualifications mm chartered accountant like for example that's why mm so that's why I enter the audit sys uh audit firm for three years after that I can venture my uh studies into ACCA to get my mmm maybe I'll transfer to commercial line to explore more about business uh I plan to uh open a audit firm like um my boss Jackson and Co ah they developed their own company successfully so I want take an example from them	**Goal 1** **Give reason** **Goal 2** **Goal 3**

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Table 3: Responses about Career Goals and Strategies Employed- Unsuccessful Candidates

Candidate	Response	Strategies
U1	my ambition is want to be an accountant and I also have my vision ah my vision is ah ah to get ACCA certification if all things go well	**Goal**
U2	uh I will like to go to audit first um to get experience because uh from my lecture and senior encourage us to uh enter to audit er first because audit is best er platform to know uh to know uh understand well about the all type of business after that uh I get mm all the experience I want to go to auditing eh accounting accountant	**Goal**

Candidate U1's response in Table 3 was very limited and hence did not showcase his ability to clinch the job. Similarly, Candidate U2's response just demonstrated a vague goal. While Candidate U1 lacked the ability to provide enough information and ended too abruptly, Candidate U2 had more to say and yet failed in terms of her ability to express herself confidently. On the other hand, both Candidates S1 and S2, as can be seen in Table 2, provided more information by elaborating or providing clear reasons and goals to achieve their ambition. Both Candidates S1 and S2 were able to show the IR their competence in terms of language, confidence and maturity of thought and thus managed to give a positive impression of themselves.

It may be inferred that on the whole, the successful candidates provided more elaboration while the unsuccessful candidates did not provide much details when answering the questions, and so were not so successful in their performance. The language strategies used could also be compared and the ones used by the successful candidates may be highlighted and be introduced into course materials and used for training purposes. For example when too many backchannels are used, it implies that the interviewees need more time to think. This could be reduced if the

interviewees were more prepared with the range of lexical items needed for the types of questions asked during such kinds of interviews. The next section will offer some suggestions where these findings may be applied into the pedagogical context.

Conclusion and Pedagogical implications

The purpose of this study is to look at what takes place in real world job interviews and to bring the findings into classrooms for training students in job interviews. While it is acknowledged that students need to be able to think creatively and critically as well as communicate well in English, the argument here is that students need to be made aware that for successful outcomes to interviews to occur,   they need to adopt strategies that can   give a good impression of themselves at interviews. Hence, by using greater elaborations, personalized answers and more details of themselves, the candidates are able to contribute to giving a positive impression.

To our knowledge many prescribed texts which teach the job interview component do not use a discursive approach. This study hopes to bridge the gap between language used in the real world of work and that prescribed in textbooks. Williams (1988) who had examined various Business English texts found that the language taught in those texts differ greatly from those used in real life. Other researchers (Scotton & Berstein 1988, McCarthy 1991, Koester 2006) also vouch that real world interactions are more complex and inevitably more varied than what we get from texts.

Examination of prescribed texts recommended for use in our course has also shown that the situation described above is true. Chapters which focus on Job Interviews dwell mostly on what to do, what to expect and tips on how to prepare oneself for the interview. No texts examined thus far by the researchers have shown any authentic verbal interaction between IR and candidates. For example, from Text A (2002), a chapter entitled "During the Interview" lists communication skills that the students need to have in preparation for the job interview. These include "listen attentively", "present your strengths honestly" and "respond fully to questions". The text then provides a section where an audio recording which shows a real job interview (by actors) is used and students discuss some post viewing questions such as "How did you rate Mark's chances for getting the job?". There are no activities or exercises which use a discursive approach where students look at how authentic or naturally occurring talk at interviews are exploited and to help them prepare more specifically on the type of responses that would clinch them a job.

Another text, B (2011), which devoted a chapter to "Job Interviews" had a section on "What skills do you need to succeed at a job interview?" and among the skills listed were "giving genuine answers", "focusing on your thoughts", "thinking on your feet", "demonstrating your enthusiasm" and so on. Further on, the text gave a few specific examples on how to answer

particular questions and to this question on "What are your strengths?", the text writers quoted these lines: "*I am good at meeting deadlines. I work hard at completing projects early. Even as a student, I find myself completing assignments way before the deadline*". These are the sort of clipped answers that texts provide but in the real world, we do not speak in this manner and our students are not exposed to enough real world speech to help them see the reality. In our data, a similar question posed was given a relatively good response (from candidate S1) and it appears in this manner: "*… strength (.) um (.) I mean (.) when I do (.) when I do my own (.) work (.) when I'm on onto something I would really give all my best and uh (.) I mean I like to excel in (.) whatever I do (.) I mean (.) will try to do (.) the best that I can in everything*". [a (.) means a pause of less than one second]

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If our students are exposed and made aware that when they speak, echoing the other speaker's utterance, repetitions, groping for words, backchannels and pauses are the norm of speech, then they could also use some of these strategies to communicate more effectively. Using backchannels, such as "uh" or "erm" allows speakers time to think and formulate their response. Although too long a pause or too many backchannels do display some linguistic incompetence, some use of them is natural in speech. As long as our students are made aware or even taught this in class, they would be more prepared to face real job interviews. Memorising formulaic expressions as provided by prescribed texts and teaching accurate grammatical structures in classrooms alone may not be sufficient.

This study has shown that a discursive approach to teaching and learning of language strategies may be useful and benefit tertiary students who are preparing themselves to face interviews at workplaces. In fact more of such studies and their findings could provide material for such training courses and make a difference in classrooms.

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