Learning English Through Workplace Communication: Linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in textbooks in Hong Kong

Abstract

Using language to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships contributes to effective workplace communication. Importantly, language plays a significant role in constructing professional role and identity, building solidarity and rapport, presenting comments and views, and facilitating collaboration and problem-solving in the workplace. Yet the teaching of workplace interpersonal language is under-researched, and the extent to which such teaching materials, in particular textbooks, can assist ESP teachers in the classroom is unknown. In this article, we report on a study which evaluates textbooks designed for a module on learning workplace English in the senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong. Specifically, it examines the textbooks, both qualitatively and quantitatively, regarding the presentation and teaching of linguistic devices of four broad areas of interpersonal meaning in different written and spoken workplace text-types and student activities. While linguistic devices in all the four broad areas of interpersonal meaning are identified, some areas, and most of the linguistic devices, are not given sufficient attention. The article therefore recommends that the textbooks should address the deficiencies identified and present interpersonal language in the workplace much more explicitly. It also highlights the need for ESP teachers to not exclusively rely on textbooks for teaching interpersonal language.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Language can be used to perform social and interpersonal functions. Understanding how to use language to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships is an important aspect of social interaction in general and of workplace communication in particular. Effective interpersonal communication skills are commonly regarded as a desirable quality of employees, and play a

significant role in constructing professional role and identity, building solidarity and rapport, presenting comments and views, and facilitating collaboration and problem-solving in the workplace. The wide range of interpersonal strategies, styles and methods employed and their linguistic devices in spoken and written communication in the workplace demonstrate the dynamic and complex nature of social interaction in today's modern society. Despite the importance of interpersonal communication in the workplace, little attention has been paid to how interpersonal skills can be and are developed in English language learning at school; little is known about the design of pedagogical materials that focuses on interpersonal communication in the workplace. In practice, this lacking of understanding of the teaching of interpersonal language means that ESP teachers remain uninformed about whether and to what extent they can rely on existing teaching materials as quick, ready-made and directly applicable resources in the classroom, when many of them are faced with the practical pressures of time, finance and other duties.

The present study extends our previous investigation into the evaluation of four textbooks specially designed for the elective module Learning English Through Workplace Communication of the English Language curriculum in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) (Authors), focusing on interpersonal language and communication. Specifically, it examines a range of linguistic resources and strategies for interpersonal meaning in different workplace contexts presented in the four textbooks to ascertain what is taught to Hong Kong senior secondary school students in preparing them specifically for workplace communication in an Asian ESL/EFL context. The article will discuss findings, quantitative and qualitative, with reference to published research, and describe implications for ESP pedagogy and further research.

2. Interpersonal communication in the workplace

Research has examined discursive, pragmatic and linguistic strategies and features employed to represent, express and negotiate interpersonal meaning in different workplace text-types and communicative settings. In the negotiation and maintenance of interpersonal relationship among workplace stakeholders such as business representatives, clients, external contacts and colleagues, it is found that such strategies and features play an important role in both written and spoken texts. For example, in American and Dutch companies' email replies to customer

inquiries, Van Mulken and Van der Meer (2005) discussed realisations of different interpersonal rhetorical strategies associated with the use of first person pronoun (versus company name), hedges, passives, emphatics, attitude markers, and titles, honorifics and first names. Similarly, in email negotiation between a Danish company and its business contact in Taiwan, Jensen (2009) found that the writer built a new business relationship with the reader by using linguistic resources, including hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention and engagement markers, in three phases of email communication: contact, negotiation and in business. Examining meetings using business English as a lingua franca (BELF), Pullin (2013) discussed the use of lexical and grammatical features, such as hedges and directives as stance markers, in achieving comity. Koester (2004) examined smaller interactional units of relationally-oriented talk, termed "relational sequences" or "relational turns" in workplace text-types. Koester identified evaluative adjectives (e.g., *Great!*, *Oh wonderful!*, and *Super!*) used as "markers of interpersonal involvement and solidarity" (p. 1412) when expressing appreciation in response to instructions or requests, and minimal response tokens (the repetition of *okay*) and non-minimal response tokens (*I should know how to do this*) which can "serve interactive and affective discourse functions" (p. 1412).

In challenging workplace scenarios such as intercultural business communication and conflicts, it is even more pressing to manage the interpersonal aspect of workplace interaction through language, as failure to do so may result in lower efficiency, reduced morale or actual financial loss. Understanding what and how interpersonal language is employed in such high-stake situations is therefore essential to avoid negative impacts on an organisation. Handford and Koester (2010) conducted a corpus study of two conflictual meetings in the United Kingdom. The researchers discussed various discoursal and interpersonal functions (i.e., evaluation, intimacy, intensity and discourse) in the use of metaphors and idioms to signal divergence more frequently than convergence and solidarity and to mark highly conflictual or even rude or insulting exchanges. In another study, Handford and Matous (2011) compared Japanese-Hong-Kongese interactions on construction sites in Hong Kong and in general English corpora. They identified similarities and differences in the interpersonal language used, including pronouns, backchannels, vague language, hedges, and deontic modality. Their study provided evidence of the unique ways in which power and solidarity are negotiated through language in the construction profession.

Research has also found that interpersonal language is used to define, in part, professional roles in specific workplace settings, showing that people-oriented skills are essential to the job in hand. Indeed, many posts require one not only to carry out transactional or operational tasks, but also to be engaged in human interactions smoothly and successfully. This is especially the case for developed economies in the contemporary society that is increasingly driven by service-oriented industries. Getting work done, whether for a chair at a meeting or for a police officer in an interview, thus means forging effective personal relations in the workplace. Researching organizational meetings, Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke (2011) identified five discursive strategies which chairs use to stimulate and shape the formation of team consensus, namely Bonding, Encouraging, Directing, Modulating, and Re/Committing. The strategy of Bonding, for example, is manifested by personal pronouns (*I* versus *we*) used by different participants. Their study concluded that durable team consensus can be developed via a more interpersonal egalitarian leadership style. Also focusing on the role of the chair in professional meetings, Tsuchiya and Handford (2014) highlighted how chairs engage in other-repair and other-reformulation to enhance participants' comprehension. Gaines (2011) found that in a police interview, the discourse operator *okay* was used by the interviewing officer for task management, solidarity overture and confrontation; for instance, when *okay?* is used as a tag question, it performs an interpersonal function which enables the officer to "make the interviewing process an easy and non-intimidating one" (p. 3297).

Many studies, including the ones reviewed above, have provided insightful findings on the ubiquity of linguistic devices for expressing and negotiating interpersonal meaning in the workplace in both spoken and written text-types of different levels of interactivity, and the wide range of grammatical, lexical and discoursal features employed to define professional roles. However, each study often focuses only on one workplace genre in a specific professional setting. A notable exception is Koester (2006) which investigated interpersonal language across genres and industries. Koester (2006) analysed the Corpus of American and British Office Talk (the ABOT Corpus) to explore both transactional and relational functions of five types of interpersonal markers, namely modal verbs, vague language, hedges, intensifiers and idioms. The ABOT Corpus contains about 30 hours (34,000 words) of audio-recorded conversations or generic stretches of talk, mainly between co-workers, in a variety of organisations and business sectors, including higher education, publishing, the paper trade, advertising and retail. Koester

(2006) identified three macro-genres, namely unidirectional, collaborative, and non-transactional genres, and compared interpersonal markers in the three macro-genres. It was found that "the frequency and use of the interpersonal markers investigated varied considerably according to genre" (Koester, 2006, p. 106), indicating that "genre has a significant impact on linguistic choice and is thus a central factor accounting for language variation within workplace talk" (p. 106).

Based on the analysis of the ABOT Corpus, Koester (2010) proposed four broad areas of interpersonal meaning relevant for workplace discourse, with characteristic linguistic devices (pp. 156-158), as follows:

1. Expressing stance: evaluating, making judgements, giving opinions (language used: modal verbs, conditionals, idioms, evaluative adjectives)

2. Hedging and expressing politeness (language used: modal verbs and adverbs, vague language, past tense)

3. Showing and building shared knowledge (language used: interactive expressions (*you know, of course*), vague language (*stuff, sort of, things like that*))

4. Showing empathy and solidarity: expressing agreement, positive evaluation (language used: evaluative adjectives and idioms, emotive verbs (*like, love*), positive feedback signals (*Great!*), colloquialisms and idioms, humour)

These four broad areas of interpersonal meaning constitute the most comprehensive framework thus far for investigating interpersonal language across genres and workplaces. They are, therefore, selected by the present study as the basis of data analysis.

3. The present study

Despite the importance of interpersonal meaning in workplace discourse, little is known about the extent to which, and the ways in which, school curriculum design and materials writing have prepared senior secondary students for interpersonal communication and building and maintaining interpersonal relationships in the workplace. In a previous study (Authors), we compared the most common spoken and written professional text-types in three commercial textbooks and a resource package published by Hong Kong's Education Bureau and in Hong Kong workplaces in terms of their representation and linguistic realisations. As a follow-up study, the present study conducted a systematic content analysis of the same textbooks to explore

how they describe and present linguistic devices used to express interpersonal meaning in the workplace, with reference to published research findings on the dynamics and complexities of actual workplace interactions at the interpersonal level.

According to *English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide* (Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority, 2007), the elective module Learning English Through Workplace Communication aims to introduce students to different workplace text-types and provide them with opportunities to:

> engage in a range of workplace tasks (e.g. making and handling telephone enquiries and complaints, writing memos) which aim to develop their knowledge and skills to use the language in a practical way and gain confidence in using English to communicate with others about work-related matters (p. 46)

In the Guide, one of the learning targets of the elective module is "to develop learners' ability to establish and maintain relationships and routines in the workplace context" (p. 46). When describing learning activities, the Education Bureau resource package, one of the textbooks examined in this study, highlights development of "presentation, organisation and interpersonal skills" (Brooke, 2009, p. 1) in students.

The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What kinds of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning are presented in the four textbooks?
2. What kinds of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning are presented across different workplace text-types?
3. How do the textbooks present the linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning?

The findings of this study will provide greater insights into first, the learning and teaching of interpersonal language and communication in the workplace at the senior secondary level for English learners in Hong Kong and the wider Asian ESL/EFL context and, second, the design of related pedagogical materials, particularly in contexts where English functions as a lingua franca.

4. Method of study

The study analysed the same four textbooks, namely three commercial textbooks and a resource package from the Education Bureau (EDB), that support the implementation of the elective module, as follows:

Brooke, M. (2009). *Learning English through workplace communication (secondary 4-6): A resource package*. Hong Kong: Education Bureau.

Esser, D., & Chan, G. (2010). *Pilot's NSS English language: Learning English through workplace communication*. Hong Kong: Pilot.

Kingsley, P. (2010). *Longman activate new senior secondary: Learning English through workplace communication*. Hong Kong: Pearson Longman.

Pilgrim, J. (2009). *Learning English through workplace communication: The elective series*. Hong Kong: Oxford.

Analysis of the four textbooks was carried out in four steps. The first step was to identify and classify all instances of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in these textbooks, using Koester's (2010) classification that comprises four broad areas of interpersonal meaning, namely expressing stance, hedging and expressing politeness, showing and building shared knowledge, and showing empathy and solidarity. Koester's (2010) corpus study of workplace discourse examined only spoken data. In addition to Koester's linguistic devices, this study also identified others that appeared in the presentation of various workplace text-types and learning activities to ensure that interpersonal language not discussed in Koester (2010) would also be examined.

The second step classified the instances of linguistic devices according to the kinds of spoken and written workplace text-types in which the devices were found (Evans, 2010; Authors).

The third step involved classifying all the instances of interpersonal language based on how they are described, presented and taught in the textbooks, resulting in two main types of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning:

Type I. Explicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning

Type II. Implicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning

The final step of data analysis involved qualitative analysis of examples, particularly those found in the most frequent spoken and written workplace text-types, from the four

textbooks in order to illustrate different kinds of linguistic devices and different ways of presenting them.

Steps 1 to 3 were conducted by a project associate under the supervision of the first author. Then a few rounds of checking of the coding and analysis results were carried out by two authors to ensure agreement of the analysis of the data.

5. Findings

5.1. Linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the four textbooks

The first research question aims to find out the types of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning (Koester, 2010) in the four textbooks of workplace communication in English. The study found 1,875 instances of expressions in 22 categories of linguistic devices, including some which are not found in Koester (2010) (see the linguistic devices and their respective areas of interpersonal meaning in bold and italics in Table 1).

Table 1. Linguistic devices in Koester's (2010) four broad areas of interpersonal meaning in the four textbooks

Broad areas of interpersonal meaning	Linguistic devices	Frequency (Percentage)
Expressing stance: evaluating, making judgements, giving opinions, *expressing demand*	Modal verbs	344 (18.35%)
	Conditionals	49 (2.61%)
	Idioms	37 (1.97%)
	Evaluative adjectives	849 (45.28%)
	Verbs	7 (0.37%)
Sub-total		**1,286 (68.59%)**
Hedging and expressing politeness	Modal verbs and adverbs	424 (22.61%)
	Vague language	3 (0.16%)
	Past tense	1 (0.05%)
	Verbs	7 (0.37%)
	Adjectives	11 (0.59%)
Sub-total		**446 (23.79%)**
Showing and building shared knowledge	Interactive expressions	3 (0.16%)

	Vague language	0
Sub-total		**3 (0.16%)**
Showing empathy and solidarity: expressing agreement, positive evaluation, *hope, apology or gratitude, signaling responses, claiming common feelings, giving advice, asking for actions*	Evaluative adjectives and idioms	10 (0.53%)
	Emotive verbs	0
	Positive feedback signals	8 (0.43%)
	Colloquialisms and idioms	4 (0.21%)
	Humour	0
	Verbs	54 (2.88%)
	Nouns	3 (0.16%)
	Adjectives	19 (1.01%)
	Discourse markers	9 (0.48%)
	Imperatives	33 (1.76%)
Sub-total		**140 (7.47%)**
TOTAL		**1,875 (100%)**

Across the four broad areas of interpersonal meaning, expressing stance (69%) is far more frequent, followed by hedging and expressing politeness (24%), and showing empathy and solidarity (7%). The area of showing and building shared knowledge is extremely infrequent (0.2%). Among the 22 categories of linguistic devices, the three most frequent ones are evaluative adjectives for expressing stance (45%), modal verbs and adverbs for hedging and expressing politeness (23%), and modal verbs for expressing stance (18%). There are three linguistic devices which are discussed in Koester (2010) but not found at all in any of the four textbooks; they are vague language (for showing and building shared knowledge), emotive verbs (for showing empathy and solidarity), and humour (for showing empathy and solidarity). At the same time, there are three linguistic devices which are identified in our study but not found in Koester (2010). They are verbs (for expressing demand in the broad area of expressing stance), verbs and adjectives (for hedging and expressing politeness), and verbs, nouns, adjectives, discourse markers, and imperatives (for expressing hope, apology or gratitude; signalling responses; claiming common feelings; giving advice and asking for actions in the broad area of showing empathy and solidarity).

Table 2 shows the distribution of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in spoken and written workplace text-types and student activities in the four textbooks. Those presented in bold and italics are not found in Koester (2010).

Table 2. Linguistic devices in four broad areas of interpersonal meaning in spoken and written workplace text-types and student activities in the textbooks

Broad areas of interpersonal meaning	Linguistic devices	Frequency (Percentage)		
		Spoken text-types	Written text-types	Student activities
Expressing stance: evaluating, making judgements, giving opinions, *expressing demand*	Modal verbs	97 (5.17%)	99 (5.28%)	148 (7.89%)
	Conditionals	6 (0.32%)	21 (1.12%)	22 (1.17%)
	Idioms	1 (0.05%)	0	36 (1.92%)
	Evaluative adjectives	183 (9.76%)	217 (11.57%)	449 (23.95%)
	Verbs	0	7 (0.37%)	0
	Sub-total	287 (15.31%)	344 (18.34%)	655 (34.93%)
Hedging and expressing politeness	Modal verbs and adverbs	202 (10.77%)	150 (8.00%)	72 (3.84%)
	Vague language	3 (0.16%)	0	0
	Past tense	0	1 (0.05%)	0
	Verbs	1 (0.05%)	5 (0.27%)	1 (0.05%)
	Adjectives	8 (0.43%)	2 (0.11%)	1 (0.05%)
	Sub-total	214 (11.41%)	158 (8.43%)	74 (3.95%)
Showing and building shared knowledge	Interactive expressions	2 (0.11%)	1 (0.05%)	0
	Vague language	0	0	0
	Sub-total	2 (0.11%)	1 (0.05%)	0

Showing empathy and solidarity: expressing agreement, positive evaluation, *hope, apology or gratitude, signaling responses, claiming common feelings, giving advice, asking for actions*	Evaluative adjectives and idioms	4 (0.21%)	0	6 (0.32%)
	Emotive verbs	0	0	0
	Positive feedback signals	6 (0.32%)	0	2 (0.11%)
	Colloquialisms and idioms	4 (0.21%)	0	0
	Humour	0	0	0
	Verbs	6 (0.32%)	44 (2.35%)	4 (0.21%)
	Nouns	1 (0.05%)	2 (0.11%)	0
	Adjectives	14 (0.75%)	4 (0.21%)	1 (0.05%)
	Discourse markers	9 (0.48%)	0	0
	Imperatives	2 (0.11%)	12 (0.64%)	19 (1.01%)
	Sub-total	46 (2.45%)	62 (3.31%)	32 (1.71%)
Total		549 (29.28%)	565 (30.13%)	761 (40.59%)

The distribution of linguistic devices in spoken (29%) and written (30%) workplace text-types is similar, so is the order of frequencies of occurrence of the four broad areas of interpersonal meaning: expressing stance, hedging and expressing politeness, showing empathy and solidarity, and showing and building shared knowledge

In the spoken workplace text-types, modal verbs and adverbs for hedging and expressing politeness is the most frequent (11%). In Example 1, the modal verb *could* is used in an example of functional language of 'talking about you' for job interviews to make the candidate's personal statement less direct (Brooke, 2009, p. S35). Other functional categories include talking about why the candidate is interested in this position, the candidate's qualifications and experience, and asking questions (p. S35). Students are asked to take a look at the list of functional language and some interview tips before conducting interview role-plays.

Example 1

I feel that I **could** play a key role in the company.

(Brooke, 2009, p. S35)

 Evaluative adjectives for expressing stance ranks second (10%). In Example 2, *would* and *could* are described as 'useful phrases' for writing cover letters. The list of phrases appears along with a sample text and descriptions of the contents and layout of cover letters.

Example 2

I **would** greatly appreciate the opportunity to have an interview to discuss at greater length how I **could** be a part of your team in the future.

(Brooke, 2009, S42)

 In the written workplace text-types, evaluative adjectives for expressing stance ranks first (12%), followed by modal verbs and adverbs for hedging and expressing politeness (8%).

 As for the 761 (41%) of linguistic devices found in various kinds of student activities, 655 (35%) function to express stance, with evaluative adjectives (24%) and modal verbs (8%) being the most frequent. Example 3 shows the presentation of two evaluative adjectives (*popular* and *effective*) which introduce students to the advertising media. This activity of answering questions and others of group discussion and fill-in-the-blank form the section entitled 'the advertising industry' in Esser & Chan (2010), which help students to build knowledge and vocabulary of different trades. In this activity, evaluative adjectives are presented in three advertising media, namely television advertising, print advertising and radio advertising. Students then answer two questions: (1) 'which advertising medium should a small company use to advertise their product?' and (2) 'what are the disadvantage of television advertising?'.

Example 3

Television advertising has been a **popular** medium for retailers because it has proven **effective** in changing customers' purchasing behaviour.

(Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 9)

5.2. Linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in workplace text-types

The second research question aims to find out the distribution of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning across different workplace text-types in the textbooks. The study found thirteen written workplace text-types (Table 3) and seven spoken ones (Table 4).

Table 3. Distribution of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in written workplace text-types in the textbooks

Written workplace text-types	Frequency (Percentage)
Letters of complaint and replies to letters of complaint	102 (5.44%)
Business emails	76 (4.05%)
Business letters	70 (3.73%)
Business memos	64 (3.41%)
Sales letters	61 (3.25%)
Proposals	57 (3.04%)
Application/cover letters	42 (2.24%)
Mixed written text-types	42 (2.24%)
Reports	22 (1.17%)
Emails of complaint	15 (0.8%)
Questionnaires for market research	7 (0.37%)
Minutes	4 (0.21%)
CV	3 (0.16%)
Total	565 (out of 1,875) (30.13%)

Among the thirteen written workplace text-types (Table 3), linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning occur the most frequently in letters of complaint and replies to letters of complaint (5%), followed by business emails (4%). The least frequent text-types are minutes (0.2%) and CV (0.2%). 2.24% of the instances are found in mixed written text-types.

Table 4. Distribution of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in seven spoken workplace text-types in the textbooks

Spoken workplace text-types	Frequency (Percentage)
Business phone calls	157 (8.37%)
Business presentations	136 (7.25%)
Job interviews	87 (4.64%)
Business meetings	66 (3.52%)
Face-to-face communication	54 (2.88%)
Making and handling complaints (telephone or face-to-face)	26 (1.39%)
Making and handling telephone complaints	23 (1.23%)
Total	549 (out of 1,875) (29.28%)

Among the seven spoken workplace text-types (Table 3), linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning occur most frequently in business phone calls (8%) and business presentations (7%). As for the two text-types related to making and handling complaints (Authors), they are the least occurring text-types (about 1% each).

As described, 1,114 (59%) of the 1,875 instances of linguistic devices are found in written (565 instances, 30%) and spoken (549 instances, 29%) workplace text-types. The remaining ones (761 instances, 41%) appear in different types of student activities that are not directly connected with the teaching of any workplace text-types. Examples are writing 'yes/no' questions and open questions to interview a partner and discussing with a classmate to give the partner career advice (Brooke, 2009); reading a teacher's email which asks students to plan and write a promotional leaflet for a simulated company; preparing for a careers programme display at school (Kingsley, 2010); and understanding the requirements of writing tasks in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Examination (HKDSE) through examining an interview transcript with a film director for the school magazine (Esser & Chan, 2010).

5.3. Presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning

The third research question aims to find out how the textbooks present linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning to students. Analysis of the 1,875 instances of linguistic devices shows two main types of presentation, namely explicit teaching (Type I) and implicit teaching (Type II) of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning, explained and exemplified, as follows:

Type I Explicit teaching of linguistic devices for interpersonal meaning

Explicit teaching means that in the textbook, there is explicit presentation and explanation of teaching points of interpersonal language and meaning in order to prepare students for completing workplace activities. Example 4 demonstrates how the textbook presents specific linguistic devices used to convey a polite tone in memos. Two sentences conveying the same meaning, one written in a 'Rude' tone and the other in a 'Polite' tone, are described as 'Incorrect' and 'Correct', respectively (Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 33). The words *could* and *please* in the 'Polite' sentence are described as 'modal verbs and adverbs' for hedging and expressing politeness (Koester, 2010).

Example 4
Rude: Send me the file immediately. (Incorrect)
Polite: **Could** you **please** send me the file as soon as possible? (Correct)
(Esser & Chan, 2010, p.33)

Type II Implicit teaching of linguistic devices for interpersonal meaning

In implicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning, the textbook does not include any teaching points of interpersonal meaning. One way is that some textbooks ask students to complete workplace activities that involve the use of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning, without describing why and how the devices are, or can be, used to convey interpersonal meaning. Without any explicit input in the textbook, students' learning appears to depend entirely on the teacher's explanations of the activity and elaboration on suggested answers, if any.

Example 5 is extracted from a series of activities designed for students to understand business letters and to ask them to match language examples for a formal style of writing in business to those for an informal style. These activities are followed by matching the language examples for formal writing with different communicative functions, including offering help, giving information, requesting action or information, referring to added documents, and concluding. The expression in Example 5 is one of the formal style.

Example 5
I **would** be delighted to assist you.

(Brooke, 2009, p. S50)

Example 5 shows interpersonal language associated with hedging and expressing politeness. The clause *I **would** be delighted to assist you* is expected to be matched to the informal phrase *I'd be glad to help…*, which conveys the function of offering help. When compared to Example 4, Example 5 is implicit in that students are asked to explore and discover the function of interpersonal language through completing certain tasks, instead of learning about interpersonal language from textbook instructions.

Table 5 presents the distribution of Type I explicit teaching and Type II implicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the textbooks. Findings show that the great majority (83%) of the linguistic devices are presented implicitly.

Table 5. Two types of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the textbooks

Types of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning	Frequency (Percentage)
Type I Explicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning	310 (16.53%)
Type II Implicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning	1,565 (83.47%)
Total	**1,875 (100%)**

In the following, more examples are discussed to illustrate the two types of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning.

For business phone calls, for example, Type 1 explicit teaching is only found in two textbooks: the EDB resource package (Brooke, 2009) and Pilot textbook (Esser & Chan, 2010). In Brooke (2009), for example, a matching exercise and a list of functional language for telephoning with interpersonal language are provided (e.g., asking for the connection, making the connection, asking about the purpose, explaining the purpose, taking messages, repeating, suggesting a meeting and confirming) (Brooke, 2009, pp. S9-S10). Most of the instances of linguistic devices are for hedging and expressing politeness; for example, *may* and *please* are used in ***May** I know who's calling **please**?* for the function of identifying the caller (p. S9).

Esser & Chan (2010) presents useful expressions for telephone conversations, with functional language largely corresponding to that in the EDB resource package (e.g. to start the conversation when making a phone call, to check who the caller is, to identify yourself to the person answering the phone, to tell the caller to wait for a while, to put the caller to another line and to tell the caller that the person he/she is looking for is unavailable). Similarly, most instances of interpersonal language are for hedging and expressing politeness; for example, *Hello, **I'd** like to speak to the manager, **please*** (Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 56).

The explicit presentation of the functional language and useful expressions in these two textbooks allow students to acquire some expressions with interpersonal meaning for making phone calls for different purposes in the workplace.

For letters of complaint and replies to letters of complaint, Type I explicit teaching is found only in the Pilot textbook (Esser & Chan, 2010). Linguistic devices are used in the 'Useful Expressions' sub-section (Esser & Chan, 2010) in the section of 'Layout, Language and Tone of a Letter of Complaint' (p. 65). Of the 59 expressions 42 are evaluative adjectives for expressing stance, most of which are phrases 'to express dismay', including *I was **shocked** to see that…*, *I am extremely **disappointed** with…*, and *I feel **angry*** (pp. 65-66).

In this 'Useful Expressions' sub-section, instances of the verbs *seem* and *seemed* are also identified. This linguistic device (i.e. verb) which realises the area of interpersonal meaning of hedging and expressing politeness is not found in Koester (2010). Example 6 shows the use of *seem* in one of the expressions. In the textbook, it is presented that writers of letters of complaint could use this expression to make their points persuasive.

Example 6

Oddly enough, the English tutor did not **seem** to know anything about the new examination. (Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 65)

Another category of linguistic device not found in Koester (2010) is verb, classified into the sub-category of 'expressing demand' in the area of expressing stance. The seven instances of verb occur in the expressions which could be used to make requests in letters of complaint, including *I **demand**… (e.g., a full refund)*, *I **expect** to receive… (e.g., some compensation)*, and *I **urge** you to look into the matter* (Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 66).

In the following, different ways of Type II implicit teaching of linguistic devices for interpersonal meaning are illustrated. One way is to ask students to complete workplace activities based on text samples that contain linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning. Example 7, taken from a gap-filling task, shows learners the use of *please* in a sample telephone conversation to mitigate the face-threatening act of making a request. The word *please* is classified as hedging and expressing politeness (Koester, 2010).

Example 7
Vincent: Yes. **Please** ask Jackie to c_____ me back.
(Esser & Chan, 2010, p. 55)

In Esser & Chan (2010), ten instances of interpersonal language are found in an activity which asks students to match each paragraph of a sample of letter of complaint to functions, such as *Explaining why you are dissatisfied* and *Stating your demands* (p. 63).

Example 8 below shows the use of three evaluative adjectives *good*, *excellent* and *educational* in a sample of an email of enquiry written by a Purchasing Manager of a retail company to a manufacturing company. Students are asked to read the email and answer some questions about business emails. While such evaluative adjectives are devices for expressing stance (Koester, 2010), their excessive and inappropriate use may sometimes backfire by obscuring the information that actually needs to be delivered (Bremner, 2018).

Example 8
We have a very **good** reputation for the **excellent** quality and **educational** value of the toys that we sell.
(Kingsley, 2010, p. 25)

Example 9 below is about expressions with interpersonal meaning for achieving 'the right level of politeness and formality' for business phone calls (Kingsley, 2010, p. 19). Students are required to complete the task of matching the 'expressions' to 'situations' of calls, i.e., 'before you end the call, when you answer the phone, when you handle a complaint, when the caller asks for information, when the caller asks to speak to another person and when you need to put the

caller on hold' (p. 18). This example shows two adverbs for hedging and expressing politeness (*Just* and *please*) in an expression that could be used to put the caller on hold.

Example 9

Just a minute, **please**. Let me check the price for you.

(Kingsley, 2010, p. 19)

In Pilgrim (2009), students are asked to read the transcripts of two telephone calls and answer short questions; for example, *What is Person B's job?* and *Call 2 is successful/unsuccessful* (p. 39). Linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning are used in the telephone conversations, and so the text sample provided contains instances of interpersonal language. Example 10 shows the use of *'d* as a modal verb for hedging and expressing politeness and *fantastic* as an evaluative adjective for expressing stance (Koester 2010).

Example10

I'd like to tell you about a **fantastic** offer we have!

(Pilgrim, 2009, p. 39).

Also in Pilgrim (2009), students are given six profiles of characters who are having a conference call about a marketing event. Based on questions, such as *Who is the strongest position in the conversation?* and *What do you think will happen after the conversation?*, students are asked to conduct a group discussion. A list of 'Useful Phrases and Expressions' (p. 46) is provided. Example 11 shows the modal verb *will* and two evaluative adjectives (*angry* and *disappointed*) for expressing stance in one of the phrases and expressions. However, there is no explicit teaching of the functions of these words.

Example 11

My character **will** feel **angry** and **disappointed**.

(Pilgrim, 2009, p. 46)

In Pilgrim (2009), seven instances of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning are found in a writing task with a sample of letter of customer complaint about her dining experience in a restaurant and information for writing the reply letter given by a staff member of the restaurant.

The EDB resource package presents a 'customer service response letter to a customer complaint template' and a sample of customer service response letter (Brooke, 2009, p. S93). Examples 12 and 13 illustrate the use of the verbs *apologise* and *hope* for expressing apology and hope respectively in the template. These two sub-categories of showing empathy and solidarity are not described in Koester (2010) either. Example 14 shows the use of the adjective *sorry* for expressing apology in the sample of replies to letter of customer complaint.

Example 12

I **apologise** for the inconvenience/problems caused by our error/failure.

(Brooke, 2009, p. S93)

Example 13

In light of this, we have decided to (state the solution or offer), which we **hope** you will find satisfactory.

(Brooke, 2009, p. S93)

Example 14

We are indeed **sorry** that our colleague did not show up to fix your electric oven on the scheduled date and time.

(Brooke, 2009, p. S93)

The above examples (7-14) illustrate implicit teaching by asking students to complete workplace tasks based on text samples which contain linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning. Another way of implicit teaching of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning involves asking students to complete workplace activities based on text samples that do not contain interpersonal language and strategies. This is found only in Brooke (2009) and Esser & Chan (2010). In Brooke (2009), all the five instances are evaluative adjectives for expressing

stance, appearing in an activity about vocabulary learning. Students are given ten 'sentences that we can use in writing a reply to a complaint letter' (Brooke, 2009, p. S87). Students are asked to fill the gaps in the sentences with the given words or phrases. Example 15 shows two of the evaluative adjectives (*important* and *complete*) in one of the sentences.

Example 15

Our most **important** philosophy is to meet our clients' needs and to offer them **complete** _____.
(Brooke, 2009, p. S87)

Answer: satisfaction
(Brooke, 2009, p. T44)

In Esser & Chan (2010), the single instance of interpersonal language is also an evaluative adjective for expressing stance: *I write to complain about the **terrible** service of your airline* (p. 65). This sentence, presented together with another sentence (*I am writing to complain about the English lessons provided by your tutorial school*), is used by the textbook writer to describe that students can use the simple present tense, or the present continuous tense, to state the purpose of writing a letter of complaint (p. 65).

6. Discussions

The study set out to investigate the kinds and patterns of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning, with reference to Koester's (2010) classification of four broad areas of interpersonal meaning, in four textbooks for the elective module Learning English Through Workplace Communication in the English Language curriculum for senior secondary students in Hong Kong. The detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis shows certain strengths and weaknesses in the four textbooks examined. The study finds that the aim of the elective module has been achieved, namely to introduce students to "different text-types related to the workplace … to develop their knowledge and skills to use the language in a practical way and gain confidence in using English to communicate with others about work-related matters" (Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority, 2007,

p. 46). However, the study also pinpoints deficiencies and shows that improvement can be made to the textbooks specifically in relation to the aspects addressed by the three research questions.

Regarding the first research question, while linguistic devices in all the four broad areas of interpersonal meaning (Koester, 2010) have been found, some broad areas, and most of the linguistic devices, have not been given sufficient attention. The study shows that the textbooks have largely neglected the broad areas of showing empathy and solidarity, and showing and building shared knowledge, both of which have been found to be important in interpersonal communication (Pullin, 2010; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Yang, 2012). Within these two broad areas, the linguistic devices of vague language (showing and building shared knowledge), emotive verbs (showing empathy and solidarity), and humour (showing empathy and solidarity) (Koester, 2010), all of which have important interpersonal functions, are non-existent. In naturally-occurring communication, vague language contributes to naturalness as it "softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct of unduly authoritative or assertive" (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 202), and "nearly always enables polite and non-threatening interaction" (Carter 2003, p. 92). Humorous comments can construct and strengthen solidarity and relationships (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Moody, 2014). Yet these crucial linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the two broad areas are given little attention in the textbooks.

With reference to the second research question, our comparative analysis of the distribution of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning across the workplace text-types in the textbooks has shown discrepancies. The frequencies of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning range from 8% in business phone calls, 5% in letters of complaint and replies to letters of complaint, 1% in making and handling telephone complaints, to 0.1% in CV. There appears to be a strong imbalance in the number of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning found in different workplace text-types in relation to their importance in the real-world workplace. As we discussed in our earlier study on the same textbooks (Authors), undue attention appears to be given to the letters of complaints and replies to letters of complaint, found to contain the highest number of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the textbooks. At the same time, such text-types as business emails, sales letters and job application letters, all of which have been found to be rich in interpersonal rhetorical strategies and linguistic resources in previous studies in authentic workplace settings (for example, Jensen, 2009; Van Mulken & Van

der Meer, 2005), receive meagre attention. This mismatch between the emphasis on certain text-types in the textbooks and their relative importance in actual workplaces may give students the wrong impression about which text-types to focus on when developing their interpersonal competence in business communication.

As regards the final research question concerning the types of presentation of linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the textbooks, the majority of the linguistic devices have been found to be presented implicitly. In most of the student activities, the textbooks do not provide any explicit explanations on the interpersonal meaning of the language presented. This finding shows that more often than not, students taking the elective module are exposed to linguistic devices of interpersonal meaning in the textbooks but do not receive sufficient instructions on how to use them in workplace contexts for interpersonal communication. In the rare cases when more explicit explanations are given on the interpersonal meaning of the language used, no attempt is made to highlight the relation between the linguistic devices and the text-type, or the role of the producer of the device. As such, the crucial insights revealed in previous studies into the impact of genre (Koester, 2006) and professional role (Wodak, Kwon, & Clark, 2011; Tsuchiya & Handford, 2014) on the use of interpersonal language in workplace communication are left unapplied.

For ESP teachers, what these deficiencies and discrepancies mean is that more often than not existing teaching materials including textbooks may not provide quick, ready-made, directly applicable solutions to their classroom. While textbooks are still undoubtedly useful resources, teachers should be mindful of and sensitive to their inadequacies, some of which have been raised in this study. Instead of exclusively relying on textbooks, practitioners need to carefully review them, assess their suitability for the specific pedagogic purpose in mind, note the problematic areas, and supplement them with other resources if necessary. With more studies evaluating existing textbooks like ours which allow cross-referencing and comparison, ESP teachers will save some time in going through a lengthy review process individually and be better informed about the relative strengths and weaknesses of materials on the market.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

With a focus specifically on interpersonal language, our study has evaluated four textbooks specially designed for the elective module Learning English Through Workplace Communication of the English Language curriculum in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). Findings from our qualitative and quantitative analysis show that while the general aim of the module can arguably be said to have been achieved, the textbooks still leave much to be desired in the area of interpersonal language in terms of content and frequencies of presentation. Specific areas for improvement have been identified, with reference to findings in previous relevant studies from authentic workplace settings.

In discussing how research on workplace communication could have implications for language education of speakers of English as a second language in New Zealand, Cooke, Brown, and Zhu (2007) remarked that power relations, cultural relations, work relations and interpersonal relations are significant aspects of the workplace. They argued that an awareness of the issues and attention to social factors and realities in workplace interactions could benefit language learners and teachers, curriculum developers and materials writers.

This study argues that while it is understandable that any instructional resource cannot cover every aspect of communication in considerable detail, given the importance of effective interpersonal skills in workplace communication, the publishers of the textbooks should be aware of the shortcomings identified and take action to address them. This should be carried out by drawing attention to the possible social factors and workplace realities concerned. For teachers of the elective module, there is a need for them to be aware of the shortcomings and to write supplementary materials that aim at a balanced and explicit presentation of the linguistic devices in the four broad areas of interpersonal meaning. Such improvements will contribute to attaining the module's learning target of "developing learners' ability to establish and maintain relationships and routines in the workplace context" (Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority, 2007, p. 46).

In the future, findings of the study can be presented to the EDB's Curriculum Development Council and Textbook Committee concerned, and disseminated to the teachers of the module through continuing professional education seminars, with a view to drawing their attention to the importance of explicit presentation of interpersonal language in the instructional materials for workplace communication as well as the quality of the textbooks examined. It is

hoped that this study will provide insights into both the design of pedagogical materials and the learning and teaching of interpersonal language in workplace communication not only in Hong Kong, but also in the wider Asian ESL/EFL context and other contexts where English functions as a lingua franca. It is also hoped that future ESP research will examine and evaluate comparable instructional materials in their specific educational contexts in relation to official curriculum objectives and teaching practices. This will allow teachers to make more informed choices of teaching materials and help to make the existing materials more applicable to the ESP classroom.

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